Motivational partnerships: increasing ESL student self-efficacy

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The present study investigated the relationship between student use of self-efficacy-building strategies through motivational partnerships (MPs) and student levels of self-efficacy and motivation in an adult intensive English program in the USA. The extent to which self-efficacy influenced motivation was also examined. After being organized into MPs and receiving self-efficacy-building strategy training from the participating teacher, 16 ESL students had their pre and post-levels of self-efficacy and motivation measured using Bandura’s ‘self-efficacy scale’, and Guilloteaux and Dörnyei’s ‘student motivational state questionnaire’. Additionally, students discussed the effectiveness of MPs on their learning experience. Results show significant correlations between student use of self-efficacy-building strategies and improvement in both self-efficacy and motivation. The results also reaffirm that significant self-efficacy levels enhance motivation. Lastly, MPs benefited students in other social, affective, and educational ways.

Introduction

English as a second language (ESL) learners often encounter discouraging situations, both inside and outside the classroom, that make it challenging for them to maintain the kind of positive cognitive state needed to achieve their desired learning objectives. In order to face such challenges, there is a need for interventions that counteract the negative cognitive states that students might experience (Bandura 2006a: 171). While most ESL educators would appropriately turn to motivational teaching practices to solve the issue of discouragement, there is a more fundamental problem that takes place in the minds of students that is not commonly addressed: a lack of ‘perceived self-efficacy’.

‘Perceived self-efficacy’ (hereafter ‘self-efficacy’) refers to an individual’s belief about his or her capabilities to perform specific tasks required to produce certain outcomes, with the intent of influencing prospective situations (Bandura 2012: 15). According to Bandura, ‘unless people believe [that] they...by their actions...can produce desired results... they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties’ (Bandura 2001: 10).

Over the past several decades, there has been an abundance of research (see Bandura 2012) in the field of cognitive psychology that has consistently demonstrated that, regardless of capability, those with greater levels of self-efficacy surpass those with lower levels in any area of human endeavour examined thus far. Additionally, Bandura claims that self-efficacy enhances motivation. With regard to the concept of self-efficacy in relation to group
dynamics, Stajkovic, Lee, and Nyberg’s (2009) meta-analytic results based on 96 studies revealed that the stronger efficacy is within groups, the greater their performance and achievements. Bandura (2001) additionally claims that collective (group) efficacy fosters greater motivation, loftier group goals, and firmer resilience during hindrances, setbacks, and stress.

Self-efficacy has mostly been studied and implemented in the fields of workplace-related psychology, sports psychology, and health psychology (Bandura 2006a: 176). However, it is somewhat surprising that relatively few studies have focused on self-efficacy as it pertains to the field of second language acquisition (SLA), as well as closely related fields such as ESL and EFL. From a topic-specific search of articles across online databases, the primary researcher found that there are approximately 25,000 SE-related articles, of which less than 200 concern SLA, with less than 20 of these dealing with ESL-related contexts, and less than 6 concerning the development of self-efficacy in ESL learners. As such, it is clear that the exploration of methods ESL educators could implement to successfully facilitate and increase student self-efficacy merits more attention.

Given the dearth of research on self-efficacy in L2 contexts, the current study was conducted to investigate how to counter the demoralizing effects of possible low levels of self-efficacy in ESL learners. Students in this study were organized into motivational partnerships (MPs); that is to say, simple social structures that are formed to maintain and increase motivation, through which an educator can facilitate the implementation of self-efficacy-building strategies. This study analyses the effects of self-efficacy-building strategies on ESL learners’ levels of self-efficacy and motivation as implemented through MPs, in an adult intensive English program (IEP) in the USA.

**Literature Review**

**The significance of self-efficacy**

In the late 1970s, Albert Bandura sought to develop a theory that explained the processes of human behavioural change, and claimed that self-efficacy was the core cognitive facet responsible for said change. Self-efficacy is not a general trait or characteristic ‘manifest uniformly across [all kinds of] tasks and contexts’ (Bandura 2012: 13), but is a context and task-specific attitude of belief about one’s capabilities in any domain of endeavour.

In his seminal publication on Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), Bandura (1986) described self-efficacy as being the first of a specific set of cognitive structural pathways that work within the decision-making portion of the brain (prefrontal cortex). The ability to make decisions, otherwise known as the agentic ability, is the product of SCT; thereby, it is also a product of its initiating and central facet: self-efficacy. As such, it is not surprising that significant levels of self-efficacy
(the foundation of human agency) have been the strongest predictor in affecting and determining personal and social behavioural change in any human endeavour (see Richardson, Abraham, and Bond 2012). In other words, without significant levels of self-efficacy, self-willed behavioural change is not possible (Bandura 2006).

Since this claim was made in the late 1980s, many studies and meta-analyses have been conducted attempting to verify the effectiveness of SCT’s key concept of self-efficacy. Boyer, Zollo, Thompson, Vancouver, Shewring, and Sims (2000) conducted two meta-analyses of self-efficacy studies and found moderate to high positive effect sizes of behavioural change in participants. Successful intentional behavioural changes in participants, other positive self-efficacy effects, and large positive effect sizes were found in 95 per cent of these studies, with only 5 per cent reporting negative effects. All studies were experimentally varied in both age and mode of treatment.

According to these studies, individuals who possessed significant levels of or increased in self-efficacy experienced the many positive effects including a firmer commitment to given undertakings, an openness to unfamiliar experiences, an increased emotional stability in the face of stressors, a stronger social proactivity in interpersonal relationships, an elevated sense of vision in goal setting, a more vigorous effort to reach higher goals, and an enhancement of motivation.

Seeing that a strong presence of or increase in self-efficacy seems necessary for these effects to take place, it is imperative that one understands how to achieve this. Bandura (1995) states that self-efficacy increases in an individual by consciously or subconsciously receiving, processing, and acting on self-efficacy-influencing sources of information:

1. Personally experiencing successes ('mastery')
2. Observing peer successes as personally attainable ('modelling')
3. Receiving verbal 'persuasion'
4. Enhancing one's 'physiological states'

Each of these will be discussed more thoroughly in the methodology.

A large body of research (see Bandura 2012) has consistently demonstrated that ‘individuals of higher self-efficacy outperform their counterparts of lower...[self]-efficacy at each level of ability’ (Bandura ibid.: 24). The research has also helped establish the relevance of the present study, which addresses the importance of self-efficacy in contexts where it is typically found to be lacking or non-existent, for example, ESL classrooms.
**Self-efficacy and motivation**

It is no surprise that the topic of motivation has received much attention in the fields of psychology and education over the past decade since, according to Thayne (2013: 1), success in L2 learning—as well as in other areas of human undertaking—is often attributed to individuals’ levels of motivation. As a result, self-efficacy—an important contributing factor to motivation—may have been inadvertently unnoticed, as is evidenced by performing a topical search of online articles using various databases and search engines, which shows that only 20 articles address the relation of self-efficacy to ESL, while hundreds more ESL-related articles deal with the more popular topic of motivation. Consequently, many educators often turn to motivational teaching practices to increase and maintain student motivation, thereby unintentionally neglecting to encourage and facilitate the prerequisite cognitive process of self-efficacy, which enables motivation.

According to Schunk (1991: 209, 211, 213) self-efficacy is motivation-generating, motivation-enhancing, and motivation-sustaining. When students are aware that they are progressing in their proficiency of a particular L2 skill, they increase in and maintain higher levels of self-efficacy, and in turn, their motivation is enhanced (Schunk ibid.: 209). Drawing from nine extensive meta-analyses of varying methodological and analytical strategies, Bandura and Locke (2003: 87) further verified that self-efficacy does indeed enhance motivation.

In sum, if individuals do not believe they can produce certain results, their motivation to continue exerting effort in the face of challenges is inhibited or nullified (Bandura 2001).

**Self-efficacy through motivational partnerships**

According to Bandura’s SCT, people do not live life in social isolation because much of what people desire is ‘achievable only through socially interdependent effort: …to secure what they cannot accomplish on their own’ (Bandura 2001: 13). This is known as using ‘proxy agency’, which is typically activated when an individual believes that the collective efficacy of a certain social system is greater than their own efficacy to achieve desired attainments. Bandura (2012: 15) further explained that when people form social systems they also create the respective ‘rules and practices, [which], in turn, influence human development and functioning’.

Stemming from the knowledge of an individual’s need to create social systems that can achieve more than one can alone, Anderson, Cave, and Thayne (2014) conceptualized a simple social system—comprising two (or more) people who engage in practices that maintain or increase the other person’s motivation—termed ‘motivational partnerships’ (MPs). A motivational partnership (MP) can emerge from any natural, pre-existing partnership, such as close friendships and spousal relationships. However, the distinguishing element of a MP is the mutual
agreement that all individuals are participating in the partnership with the intent of boosting and maintaining the other’s motivation. Knowing that their partner is there to help them attain their desired goals, students in such partnerships feel socially safe to combine their knowledge, abilities, resources, and emotional support, in working interdependently towards their shared or individual objectives (Stajkovic, Lee, and Nyberg op.cit.). The current study utilized this social structure as the medium through which self-efficacy-building strategies were implemented.

**Research questions**

Guiding this study are the following research questions:

1. Does the implementation of self-efficacy-building strategies through MPs significantly increase
   a. Student self-efficacy?
   b. Student motivation?
2. To what extent does an increase in self-efficacy enhance motivation?
3. In what other ways do MPs affect students’ and teachers’ learning experience?

**Methodology**

**Participants**

This study took place at the English Language Center at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, USA. The participants were comprised of an intact class of 16 international students (eight male and eight female) from the intermediate-level section of the program. Their ages ranged from 18 to 39 ($M=24.5$). The participating teacher of this class was the MP facilitator for the study.

**Instruments**

Two instruments were used to investigate student levels of self-efficacy and motivation: Bandura’s (2006b) ‘Self-efficacy Scale’, and Guilloteaux and Dörnyei’s (2008) ‘Student Motivational State Questionnaire’. Each will briefly be discussed.

**Bandura’s Self-efficacy Scale**

Recent research in self-efficacy has drawn from Bandura’s ‘Guide for Constructing Self-efficacy Scales’ to construct questionnaires that measure levels of self-reported perceived self-efficacy. Likewise, this study used the principles from Bandura’s guide to construct a questionnaire that measured pre and post-treatment levels of student self-efficacy:
[students] record[ed] the strength of their [task-specific] efficacy beliefs on a 100-point scale, ranging in 10-unit intervals from 0 (“Cannot do”); through intermediate degrees of assurance, 50 (“Moderately certain can do”); to complete assurance, 100 (“Highly certain can do”). (Bandura 2006b: 312)

The scale measured student self-efficacy in three specific domains of scholastic endeavour: reading proficiency (13 items; the area of most interest to the study), self-regulated learning behaviour (four items), and sociability (four items). Because the students were at an intermediate-low level of English reading comprehension, they were invited to seek clarification from the instructor if certain items could not be fully understood.

**The Student Motivational State Questionnaire**

The ‘Student Motivational State Questionnaire’ created by Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (op.cit.) was used in the present study (pre and post-treatment) to assess the students’ motivational states and perceptions regarding their ESL reading course. Previous scales and studies from which this questionnaire was adapted are referenced in Guilloteaux and Dörnyei (ibid.: 65). This adapted questionnaire included 45 items rated on a 6-point scale, beginning at 1 (‘definitely not true of me’) ranging through 6 (‘totally true of me’). This questionnaire was also not translated from English into the students’ native languages for the same aforementioned reasons. Students were permitted to seek clarification on the questionnaire items they did not fully comprehend.

**Procedures and treatment**

**Administration of tests**

The teacher administered the pre-tests of both the self-efficacy scale and the motivational state questionnaire during the first week of class. Students were told what each of these instruments would measure. The teacher administered the post-tests of the scale and questionnaire during the week preceding the students’ final proficiency exams. Students were also reassured that their results would not be disclosed, nor would their results affect their proficiency grades in any way. Thus, at the top of each test was an area whereon students drew a unique symbol only they could recognize as their own. After the teacher collected the tests, he then marked each with a number between 1 and 16 for test identification and organization purposes. The duration of administration of both the scale and the questionnaire to the 16-student class was approximately 80 minutes.

**Treatment: MPs and self-efficacy-building strategies**

After calculating the students’ self-efficacy and motivation scores, the teacher plotted students on an x-y axis by rank (1 to 16 for both measures). The teacher
then organized students into MPs by coupling students of similar motivation levels but opposing self-efficacy levels. For example, a student with high levels of motivation and self-efficacy was paired with a student of high motivation but low levels of self-efficacy. Pairing students of similar motivation levels was done with the intent of fostering a mutual drive and common goal mind set, and minimizing conflicts of interests that could potentially lead to partnership tension. The additional criteria in the pairing of MPs was that of opposing levels of self-efficacy. This was done so that one of the partnership members could act as a natural leader in the building of self-efficacy within the partnership. Students were told that their partnerships were determined by their pre-test scores of both instruments and the previously mentioned MP criteria.

At the beginning of a class period at the end of the first week, students identified their pre-test by their respective symbol and located the ID number attached to their test. The teacher announced the MPs by calling out the corresponding ID numbers. Students were invited to sit by their new motivational partner, and were told that they would be doing the majority of in-class work during the semester with that partner. The teacher then allowed a few minutes of class time for the partnerships to become better acquainted.

The teacher told the students that the purpose of MPs was to help individuals increase in self-efficacy and consequently motivation by implementing four self-efficacy-building strategies. The concept of self-efficacy was explained to the students in intermediate-level language.

Students were trained on each of the following self-efficacy-building strategies based on Bandura’s (1995) self-efficacy-influencing sources of information:

1. Personally experiencing successes: helping one another be aware of and celebrate personal successes, for example, Student A: ‘What big or small successes have you had today?’ Student B: ‘Well, I’m getting a little faster at previewing texts.’ A: ‘That’s great! I know you’ve been working hard at that. Keep it up!’ B: ‘Thanks!’

2. Observing peer successes as personally attainable: helping one another see how to obtain the success they have personally experienced, for example, Student A: ‘I have a hard time finding specific details quickly; I’ll never be able to do it.’ Student B: ‘Hey! Don’t get discouraged! I had the same problem too, but look at what I tried. It’s been working great. If I can do it, so can you!’

3. Receiving verbal persuasion: helping one another believe they can accomplish tasks and thereby attain their desired objectives, for example, Student A: ‘You can do this! You’ve been improving little by little and you’ll get there sooner than you think; I’ll help you get there. You have to believe that you can do this!’ Student B: ‘All right, I will. Thanks again for looking out for me.’
4 Enhancing one’s physiological states: helping one another stay accountable for good health and wellness habits, for example, Student A: ‘I’m so tired today; I can’t focus.’ Student B: ‘Drink some water and stretch. Also, be sure to go to bed earlier. I can send you a reminder text if you want.’ A: ‘Yes. That sounds good. Thank you!

After receiving training on these four strategies, students were told that they should choose and implement one or more of the four strategies during the first five minutes of class each day. At the end of every week, students reported how frequently they used certain strategies on a private online Google spreadsheet (for example, ‘strategy #1: 3 times, #2: 2 times’). The teacher gave a basic review of one of the strategies at the beginning of each week to keep the know-how of strategies fresh in the minds of students.

Findings and Discussion

A Pearson correlation analysis was run on the self-efficacy and motivation scores’ change over time and the total frequency of self-efficacy-building strategies use each student had reported throughout the semester.

Quantitative findings

The correlation between student use of self-efficacy-building strategies and student self-efficacy improvement was statistically significant, \( r(14) = .681, p = .004 \), (adjusted \( r^2 = .425 \)), with the strategy implementation accounting for nearly 43 per cent of student self-efficacy improvement, and with the reading skill self-efficacy domain being the highest in significance. This finding implies that the use of self-efficacy-building strategies within MPs did indeed play a significant role in increasing student self-efficacy (especially in the course’s target language skill, reading).

Likewise, student use of these strategies and student motivation improvement were strongly correlated, \( r(14) = .669 p = .005 \), (adjusted \( r^2 = .409 \)), explaining 41 per cent of the variance. This evidence suggests that MPs can have a significant enhancing effect on student motivation.

Lastly, student self-efficacy and motivation improvements showed the greatest correlation when compared to the rest of the analyses, \( r(14) = .836 p < .001 \), (adjusted \( r^2 = .678 \)). This finding suggests that as individuals’ self-efficacy improves, so does their motivation. It also implies that self-efficacy improvement accounts for approximately 68 per cent of motivation enhancement.
In addition to the correlation findings, the author found that students reported using the ‘mastery’ and verbal ‘persuasion’ self-efficacy-building strategies the most. Based on this observation, the question of whether the use of certain strategies influence the increase of self-efficacy and motivation more than others merits further investigation.

**Qualitative findings**

During part of a class period approximately seven weeks into the semester, the teacher facilitated an informal class discussion during which students shared their opinions on and perceptions of motivational partnerships. The student responses were audio-recorded for transcription. Common themes were found amongst their responses, from which four salient positive effects of MPs can be derived: an increase in student confidence and decrease in their fears, greater student collaboration, consistently rendered and conveniently available emotional support for students by their motivational partners, and greater class unity. Pseudo names in the following text have been included to preserve student anonymity, and the exact wording of these students has been maintained despite some non-standard English.

1. Students frequently mentioned that, due to these partnerships, their fears decreased and their confidence increased. Consider Angelica’s representative comments on the matter:

   When I arrived here it’s like, ‘I know nothing’! ... [And] I was always afraid. And then we had a motivation partner. Then I feel like, ‘I can do this!’ And even when I don’t believe, my motivational partner ... believes in me.

   This is not surprising given Bandura’s (2000) findings that higher collective efficacy led to greater resilience when facing doubt-fostering situations.

2. Another commonly noted advantage of MPs by the students was that they collaborated more to help each other reach their goals. Of this point, Beatrice said, ‘We can talk and give or receive some suggestions from each other. The motivational partnerships is better than just do individual’. David added, ‘Motivational partners is very good because we can talk each other results and concerns, and that helps a lot in order to improve ourselves’. These statements concur with Stajkovic, Lee, and Nyberg’s (op.cit.) meta-analytic finding that the greater the collective efficacy and interdependent effort, the greater the group productivity and performance.

3. Students also reported giving each other more emotional support in their partnerships during challenging or discouraging situations. Fernanda highlighted this advantage in the following statement:
[My partner] always encourages. And every day he turn to me ‘How was your score?’ I say ‘Today is 38/100’. He say, ‘It’s ok. That’s good’! When times are hard to me he always says you can do it. And now know I can do it and then I know I can progress.

This outcome is almost expected given past research (Bandura 2000), which reveals that when a group possesses significant amounts of collective efficacy they also have a greater staying power in the face of setbacks.

4 Many students claimed they experienced greater class unity than usual. Consider Eduardo’s statement on this advantage: ‘I think we, as class, we are like more united than other classes because we are more concerned with each other with partnerships. We know more about each other’. Eduardo’s comment mirrors Bandura’s research on the power of collective efficacy, which states that ‘a high sense of [collective] efficacy promotes...cooperativeness, helpfulness, and sharing, with a vested interest in each other’s welfare (Bandura 2001: 15)’.

In addition to students’ positive reception of motivational partnerships, the participating teacher’s observations regarding this is as follows:

From the time motivational partnerships were created, students seemed a lot more relaxed and safe. They demonstrated more enthusiasm and positivity than any other class I have taught. There was more focus in class. Group work was easily facilitated. Students had someone to conveniently turn to in times of emotionally difficult situations. The students are also a lot more aware of the progress they make because someone is always there to help them see their improvement.

It is also important to note that other teachers had noticed a positive difference in the participating students, and often inquired of the participating teacher as to how they could implement MPs in their own classes.

**Limitations**

This study was by design intended to be small and exploratory in nature. Therefore, as further MP research is conducted, researchers should apply the following to avoid the limitations of the current study:

- Ensure a much larger student participant size
- Provide a MP training module for participating teachers
- Conduct researcher-participant interviews which include a specific set of questions regarding students’ and teachers’ perception of motivational partnerships; an electronic survey could also accomplish the same end.
Conclusion

The quantitative results of the current study suggest that student use of self-efficacy-building strategies through MPs produce a significant increase in both student self-efficacy and student motivation. Additionally, the results reaffirm and contribute to an understanding of Schunk's (1991), and Bandura and Locke's (2003) claim that self-efficacy enhances motivation.

Aside from an increase in self-efficacy and motivation, and from the qualitative side of the study, the student and teacher responses reveal that there are many other positive effects of implementing motivational partnerships.

Motivational partnerships have shown promising effects thus far in ESL education. As such, other uses and benefits of these partnerships merit further investigation, not only in the field of ESL, but in other L2 contexts, as well as other fields of human endeavour. Finally, institutions or programs may benefit greatly from including MPs as part of their social infrastructure.

*WORD COUNT: 3,828

REFERENCES


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