

Developing Student-Writers' Self-efficacy Beliefs

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Abstract

Based on Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 1986) research in academic writing and self-efficacy has shown that there is a relationship between students' performance and their belief in their writing abilities (Matoti and Shumba 2011, Shah *et al.* 2011, Prat-Sala and Redford 2012). Using questionnaires, interviews and an assessed written task, this study seeks to contribute to this research by exploring the relationship between writing proficiency and self-efficacy beliefs of undergraduate students taking an Advanced Writing Skills course. The aims of the study were to find out a) what the writing proficiency self-ratings of students doing the Advanced Writing Skills course are like b) their writing self-efficacy beliefs c) what they perceive to be problems related to their writing skills and d) whether there is any relationship between performance level of the students and their self-efficacy beliefs. An analysis of the results reveals that although students' self-rating was high, their efficacy beliefs were moderate. The results of the present study also reveal that there was no relationship between students' essay writing performance and their self-efficacy beliefs in the context of this study. This article argues that although self-efficacy beliefs need not be high for students to be motivated to perform better, boosting these beliefs can add to students' tools for developing their writing competence.

Introduction

The significance of the study discussed in this article is in establishing a relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and advanced writing skills in higher education; and further exploring factors that affect the writing performance of the students learning advanced writing skills at the University of Botswana. Botswana is not an exception to the writing problems such as grammar, spelling, punctuation, expression, vocabulary and referencing, that have been identified in higher education (Matoti and Shumba 2011, Al-Khasawneh 2010). University of Botswana academicians raise concerns time and again about students' poor writing skills, and the Communication Skills Unit (in the Centre for Academic Development) has continued to explore ways of assisting students to improve their writing. The Advanced Writing Skills course is one of the courses offered to address the students' writing problems. This study is an attempt to report the factors that contribute to the learning problems of students. The findings of this study further substantiate the submission that learners should be helped to develop substantive knowledge of the writing process and to be trained in effective writing strategies (Pajares 2000). Furthermore, students' self-efficacy beliefs should be explored to help lecturers to motivate their students to engage in literacy activities that can increase reading and writing performance (Walker 2003).

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Self-efficacy is one of the concepts of Social Cognitive Theory (SCT), a psychological model of behaviour that emerged primarily from the work of Bandura (1977, 1986). The SCT explains that people learn and choose to behave in a particular way (Bandura 1997) influenced by social and physical environmental factors such as family, friends and colleagues, temperature, types of food, biological changes, age, status, institutional and occupational systems, career changes, illnesses and migration (Glanz *et al.* 2002). Self-efficacy simply refers to people's specific judgments and beliefs about their abilities to perform a task such as writing an essay or reading a book. Zimmerman (1995) indicates that self-efficacy beliefs are task specific, and Walker (2003) points out that performing such tasks will depend on the goals learners set themselves within specific situations. Self-efficacy beliefs are also influenced by interest, value, and utility, and affective reactions. Past research has investigated the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and other motivational constructs such as self-concept, self-esteem, self-regulation, task value and anxiety (Pajares and Cheong 2003, Lane *et al.* 2004, Garcia and de Caso 2006). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy beliefs are reciprocal because they influence behaviour and can in turn be influenced by the behaviour. Bandura (1993, 1994, 1997) further posits that people with high self-efficacy believes persevere more and are intrinsically motivated to do difficult tasks and are less likely to be anxious. On the other hand, people with low self-efficacy easily become discouraged and give up.

A number of sources of self-efficacy beliefs have been identified. The first source is the mastery experience or experiences of one's performance on a similar task in the past (Bandura 1997). For example, if such a task was successfully performed one's personal self-efficacy will increase and if not, one's personal self-efficacy diminishes. According to Pajares (2003), successfully accomplishing a task that is regarded as challenging can increase self-efficacy beliefs. The second source of self-efficacy beliefs is the vicarious experience or a situation where one's self-efficacy is gained as one observes others' performance against theirs. One's self-efficacy is boosted when one realises that they have performed the tasks better than those they were observing. The third source of self-efficacy comes from the persuasions or comments one receives from others. Positive comments may strengthen the self-efficacy beliefs and negative ones will weaken them (Bandura 1997). For example, these beliefs can be developed when teachers or parents make positive task-specific comments about the student's success (Schunk 2003). The fourth source of self-efficacy beliefs is physiological and affective. Individuals who are less anxious or tense are likely to perform a task more successfully than those who are more anxious (Bandura 1997). In addition, when students are faced with challenging situations, they use metacognitive strategies such as asking themselves questions to check their understanding, and as they do that their self-efficacy beliefs increase (Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2003).

High levels of self-efficacy beliefs have also been found to be more beneficial for increasing achievement, improving social skills, increasing tolerance, avoiding fear and developing assertiveness (Bandura 1986). Persistence may also be increased when students' interest and motivation are developed, for example, when they are given the responsibility to choose their own writing topics (Walker 2003). However, self-efficacy beliefs need not be extremely high for learners to be motivated (Schunk 2003). Also, self-efficacy beliefs do not directly increase one's writing competence, but help one to generate increased concentration and more efforts in the task one is performing (Pajares and Valiante 1997). It should be noted that the self-efficacy construct is complex and multidimensional and does not provide easy answers to students' problems. Other factors are equally important in motivating students.

Self-efficacy beliefs have been found to play an important role in writing in higher education. Prat-Sala and Redford (2012) conducted research in which they assessed the relationship between writing and reading self-efficacy beliefs and performance on a piece of assessed written coursework. Using second year undergraduate psychology students, their findings supported the importance of the concept of self-efficacy in relation to students' performance. Matoti and Shumba (2011) assessed writing efficacy of post-graduate students at a university of technology in South Africa. Matoti and Shumba (2011) wanted to find out what the level of writing efficacy of post-graduate students enrolled in B.Ed. (Hons), PGCE and ACE programmes was like; whether there were differences in the writing

efficacy of the students they investigated; what contextual variables the differences in the writing efficacy of the students could be attributed to and what intervention strategies could be employed to help students in their programmes. Their findings showed that the post-graduate students they investigated had a low level of self-efficacy in writing

Even at different levels of education self-efficacy beliefs have been associated with writing. Shah, Mahmud, Din, Yusuf and Pardi (2011) examined English language learners' self-efficacy in writing. They investigated the self-efficacy of Malaysian secondary school students learning English, and examined the relationship between the learners' self-efficacy and their writing performance and competence. The descriptive analysis showed that the respondents showed a medium level of self-efficacy in writing. Correlational analysis showed that there was a significant positive relationship between self-efficacy and writing performance. Other studies have also found a strong relationship between self-belief and writing outcomes in academic settings (Pajares 2000, 1996, 2001, Pajares and Valiante 1999, Bruning and Horn 2000). Overall, the above review provides evidence for a relationship between self-efficacy in writing and writing performance.

It is against this framework that this study sought to explore the relationship between writing proficiency and self-efficacy beliefs of students taking the Advanced Writing skills course. The study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the writing proficiencies of students doing the Advanced Writing Skills Course?
- b) What are the students' writing self-efficacy beliefs like?
- c) Is there any relationship between essay performance level of the students and their self-efficacy beliefs?
- d) What do students perceive to be problems related to their writing skills?

Research design

Sample

Participants involved in this study were two groups of third and fourth year students who came from the University of Botswana and were enrolled for an Advanced Writing Course. The course is offered as a General Education Course by the Communication and Study Skills Unit in the Centre for Academic Development. Undergraduate students from different faculties can take the course as an elective at any level past year one. This is a two credit semester long course and the mode of assessment is mainly through written academic assignments. Convenience sampling was used in this study and a total of 46 students taught by one of the researchers participated in the study. The students came from faculties of Humanities, Health Sciences, Education and Social Sciences. Participation was voluntary and students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity in reporting the data.

The instrument

The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature and a questionnaire adapted from Lavelle (2006) was used to find out students' perceptions about their own writing. This questionnaire is referred to as a 'Low Self-efficacy scale' and has been tested for reliability by its developers (Lavelle 2006). The questionnaire was modified to suit the context and additional items were added. The response method was a Likert Scale where students had to tick an appropriate box where 5 was strongly agree and 1 was strongly disagree. Students also responded to items reflecting level of study, faculty and gender. In addition some open ended questions were also included to give students an opportunity to write freely about how they perceived their own writing.

The writing task

As part of the regular assessment requirements, students were given a writing task which required them to choose an authentic assignment from their disciplines and write an academic essay of about

1 200 words to 1 500 words as homework. The assignment contributed 30% to the final grade in the course. Students were supposed to reflect the ability to write a well-organized essay, with a clear structure, introduction with a clear statement of intent, ability to integrate sources, ability to write a coherent essay using transitions, and fluency in language use in their writing. This task was used to identify students' actual writing capabilities and quality of writing in line with the aspects stipulated above. The study also aimed at assessing whether there was a correlation between students' performance and their self-efficacy rating.

The interviews

Semi structured interviews were also carried out with 8 students. Two male students and two female students from each class were interviewed using convenience sampling. These interviews were recorded and later transcribed for analysis. The interviews were meant to probe students further to provide rich and varied insights into their beliefs about their own writing.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics methodology was used to analyse quantitative data. Pearson Product Moment correlations were used to test for the relationship between the overall essay writing performance and overall self-efficacy beliefs of the students. Qualitative data were presented according to themes that emerged from the interview data and the open ended questions. These included how students perceived themselves as writers, how they rated their writing, what difficulties they had with writing and their fears about writing.

Results and Discussion

Proficiency of the students

This study sought to investigate the writing proficiency or performance of students enrolled in the Advanced Writing Skills course so that these could be compared with the students' self-efficacy beliefs. Results indicate that the majority of students (76.1%, N=35) rated themselves good to very good writers. A breakdown of the results show that none of the students rated themselves as below average (50% and below); 13% (N=6) of the students rated their performance between 51 and 60% (Average); 39 % (N=18) rated their performance between 61 and 70 % (good); 37% (n=17) rated their performance between 71 and 80% (Very Good); and only 10.9 % (N=5) rated their performance between 81% and above (Excellent). Some of the interviewed students attributed their high self-rating to a number of factors such as:

- Good performance in their essays,
- Fluency of expression,
- Involvement in extensive reading,
- External motivation from the lecturers in terms of feedback they have received.

For example, one interviewee indicated that *'I can express myself better in writing and my teachers have also praised my writing, which has increased my confidence level'*. Another interviewee reiterated the same idea when he said that *"the feedback I get from my lecturer also points out that I am confident"*.

Interestingly, the essay writing performance of the students seemed to tally with the students' self-ratings. The average mark or mean of the essay marks was 67% (N=45, SD 14.305), which in the above ratings is good. The lowest student scored 40% and highest 85 % in the essay assignment.

Self-efficacy Beliefs

Just as the majority of the students rated their writing proficiency as good, the majority again 73.9% (N=34) considered themselves as confident writers; and 26.1% (N=12) as not. However, the students' actual writing self-efficacy beliefs recorded a moderate mean of 3.37 (N=37, SD =0.33), in the Writing Efficacy Scale (Lavelle 2006), where 5 meant strongly agree; 4 meant agree; 3 meant neutral; 2 meant disagree and 1 meant strongly disagree. Furthermore, the students recorded a moderate mean of 3.49 (N=45, SD=0.695) in Item 8 (*I do well in essay tests*) and 3.57 (N=44, SD=0.728) in Item 9 (*I do well on essay assignments*). These findings suggest that the students are not as confident in writing as they claim to be. This is further testified by the average score of 3.28 (N=43, SD=1.297) in Item 7 (*I need special encouragement to do my best in writing*); and Item 2 (M=3.15, N=46, SD=1.135 – *I am slow at completing the process of essay writing*). A further closer look at individual items in the instrument shows that the students think they can write an academic paper (Item 1: M=4.04, N=45, SD=0.903) because they expect good grades when they write (Item 6: M=4.27, N=47, SD=0.751), and that they most importantly observe the rules of punctuation and grammar (Item 13: M=4.07, N=45, SD=0.863) (See Table 1). This is a good sign that the students can improve in both essay writing and writing self-efficacy beliefs if they are assisted accordingly. The students are not scared of having their writing evaluated by their peers (Item 2: M=2.33, N=46, SD=1.301) and are not scared of having their writing marked by their lecturers (Item 5: M=2.56, N=45, SD=1.341).

Table 1. Self-efficacy beliefs averages

No.	Statement	N	M	SD
1.	I can write an academic paper	45	4.04	.903
2.	I am slow at completing the process of essay writing	46	3.15	1.13
3.	Studying grammar and punctuation would greatly improve my writing	46	4.52	.722
4.	Having my writing evaluated by my peers scares me	46	2.33	1.30
5.	Having my writing marked by my lecturer scares me	45	2.56	1.34
6.	I expect good grades on essays that I write	45	4.27	.751
7.	I need special encouragement to do my best writing	43	3.28	1.29
8.	I do well on essay tests	45	3.49	.695
9.	I do well on essay assignments	44	3.57	.728
10.	I can write simple, compound and complex sentences	46	3.72	.886
11.	My writing rarely expresses what I really think	45	2.64	1.11
12.	I like to work in small groups to do revision in writing	45	2.62	1.37
13.	The most important thing in writing is observing the rules of punctuation and grammar	45	4.07	.863
14.	I often do writing assignments at the last minute and still get a good grade	46	2.87	1.20
15.	I cannot revise my own writing because I cannot see my mistakes	46	2.65	1.15
16.	If the assignment calls for 1000 words, I try to write just about that many.	46	3.91	1.05

The relationship between essay performance level of the students and their self-efficacy beliefs

The association between performance level of the students and their self-efficacy beliefs was measured using the Pearson Product Moment correlations. As shown in Table 2 below, there is no significant relationship ($r = 0.751$, $p < n.s$) between self-efficacy beliefs and essay performance. Specifically the results of this study show that an increase in self-efficacy beliefs of the Advanced Writing Skills students is not related to their increase in performance. Previous research (Pajares and Schunk 2001) has suggested that high self-efficacy beliefs and achievement are associated. However, that is not the case in the current study. It may be that high-achieving students may have gained more confidence in their learning through equally important factors (e.g. teaching styles). According to Salmeron-Perez *et al.* (2010), self-efficacy beliefs alone are not enough to determine

performance. In other words, sometimes self-efficacy beliefs alone do not guarantee success in performing tasks.

Table 2. Relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and overall essay performance

N	Pearson R	Statistical Significance
45	0.054	0.751

Perceived writing problems

The students perceived the following writing problems:

- Failure to express themselves well for the reader to understand,
- Writing a clear thesis statement,
- Writing coherent arguments,
- Citation problems, especially in text citation,
- Spelling and punctuation,
- Critical analysis issues presented,
- Taking a stance and being heard,
- Sentence construction and run-on sentences.

Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for improving the students' advanced writing skills, especially in essay writing. Many students in the Advanced Writing Skills course were already confident and had already reached a good or very good level of achievement in writing. However, this study shares the same sentiment as Pajares (2003), that teachers should take seriously their responsibility for nurturing students' self-efficacy beliefs because these beliefs can have beneficial or destructive influences. The findings of this study show that the Advanced Writing Skills students who participated in this study had moderate writing self-efficacy beliefs ($M=3.37$, $N=37$, $SD=0.33$), contrary to what they thought about their writing confidence. The students scored average means in the following items: *I do well in essay tests* ($M=3.57$, $N=44$, $SD=0.728$); *I do well on essay assignments*; *I need special encouragement to do my best in writing* ($M=3.28$ ($N=43$, $SD=1.297$); and *I am slow at completing the writing process* ($M=3.15$, $N=46$, $SD=1.135$). This suggests that university lecturers in general, as well as communication and study skills lecturers should nurture and boost students' writing self-efficacy beliefs.

Different strategies should be used to boost students' writing self-efficacy beliefs. In conjunction with Walker's (2003) recommendation, one strategy is to form and encourage collaborative groups or partners. In these groups students will have a choice and an opportunity to interact with one another. In this study students recorded a low mean in the statement *I like to work in small groups to do revision in writing* ($M=2.62$, $N=45$, $SD=1.37$). Their disagreement with this statement suggests that they do not favour group work contrary to the fact that group work has been found to be very beneficial in learning (Koh and Hill, 2009). Lecturers should try various ways of making group work interesting.

Peer and self-assessment are other areas that lecturers could use more in order to boost the students' writing self-efficacy beliefs. The findings of this study suggest that students are ready to embark on these assessments because they disagreed or recorded low scores in statements: *Having my writing evaluated by my peers scares me* ($M=2.33$, $N=46$, $SD=1.30$) and *having my writing marked by my lecturer scares me* ($M=2.56$, $N=45$, $SD=1.34$). Walker (2003) recommends that teachers should create self-assessment tools and change the assessment context.

Finally, more focus should be placed on problems identified by students. In the Advanced Writing Skills course at the University of Botswana, for example, students should be encouraged to work more on punctuation and grammar because these are some of the areas they identified as needing more attention. Students themselves agreed that *the most important thing in writing is observing the rules of punctuation and grammar* ($M=4.07$, $N=45$, $SD=0.863$). They should also improve writing clear expressions, clear thesis statements, coherent arguments, and writing citations, analysing issues, taking a stance and sentence construction. Editing in particular has proven to be a problem as one interviewee said, *“There is the culture of students doing assignments last minute, therefore I fail to edit my work properly, I just write and submit without reading the assignment at all, and therefore I have problems like run on sentences, fragments and spelling mistakes.*

Limitations

The size of the sample limits the generalisation of the findings of this study. This study recommends that lecturers should do more subject and task specific studies to investigate the writing self-efficacy beliefs of their students. Although this study compared proficiency with self-efficacy beliefs, the students were not asked to comment on their beliefs with specific reference to the essay they wrote. The study focused on essay writing in general. Perhaps if the students had been asked to comment specifically on the essay they wrote the findings would have been different. Another limitation is that this study did not use students from one discipline only but from different disciplines and these are students who took the Advanced Writing Skills course as an elective. Probably, using students from one discipline would have given us a clearer picture of the extent to which self-efficacy is related to writing performance in that particular discipline. As Prat-Sala and Redford (2012) rightly point out writing self-efficacy scales do not seem to assess all the key skills that undergraduate students are expected to perform when writing essays and this is another limitation of this study. They point out that self-efficacy scales tend to focus on foundational sub-skills upon which higher order processes of writing are grounded such as correctly spelling all words in a one page passage or writing a simple sentence with proper punctuation and grammatical structure. However, there are other aspects that these scales do not include but are relevant for essay writing in higher education (e.g. critically evaluating ideas and arguments in an essay using evidence).

Conclusion

Despite the limitations discussed above, the study provides useful insight into how students of the Advanced Writing Skills course rated their writing performance and whether there is a relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and overall performance in a writing task. The results of the present study show that although students' self-rating was high, their efficacy belief was moderate. We would have expected the students' self-efficacy belief to be higher because these upper-level students had spent a longer period in the university and therefore would have had numerous chances of developing their writing skills. However the problems the students highlighted which are crucial to writing at university such as proper integration of sources to support arguments developed, critical evaluation of issues being presented, taking a stance, and coherence could be an indicator that we need to put more attention on these crucial skills in the teaching of academic writing. There was no relationship between the students' essay writing performance and their self-efficacy beliefs in this study. This does not mean that such a relationship does not exist. Studies have pointed to the existence of this relationship as indicated earlier. However, it is possible that such a relationship may not yet exist for some students because other variables such as motivation and goals may reduce the influence of self-efficacy (Prat-Sala and Redford 2012). In conclusion, overall the results provide a starting point for identifying what factors might contribute to students' writing performance. We believe that, in addition to addressing other problems that we have identified, student-writers' self-efficacy beliefs need to be boosted in order to add to the repertoire of tools students can draw upon to develop as academic writers.

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