



THE INTERFACE BETWEEN EFL LEARNERS' SELF-EFFICACY CONCERNING LISTENING COMPREHENSION AND LISTENING PROFICIENCY

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Abstract: Since the focus of education has shifted from teacher-directed to learner-oriented instruction in recent decades, a growing body of research in the field of EFL/ESL learning involves issues relevant to learners and their individual differences. It should be pointed out that one of the important factors affecting test scores is test takers' characteristics. Therefore, the present study concentrated on one of these individual differences; namely self-efficacy. To narrow down the focus of investigation, this study aimed at exploring the role of EFL learner's self-efficacy regarding listening comprehension in their listening test performance. Hence, the main research question addressed by the present study was 'Are there any relationships between EFL learners' self-efficacy regarding listening comprehension and listening proficiency?' A group of 61 freshmen undergraduate learners of English consented to participate in the present study. Data on the learners' self-efficacy were collected through an author-designed questionnaire. The listening proficiency was quantified and extracted based on the students' answers to a listening test performance titled as 'Listening Diagnostic Pre-test' adopted from paper-based Longman TOEFL(2001, pp.3-6). The results of statistical analyses indicated that listening comprehension self- efficacy was significantly related to listening proficiency.

Key words: Foreign language learning, self-efficacy, listening proficiency, learners' beliefs

Özet: Son yıllarda eğitimde odak, öğretmen güdümlü öğretimden öğrenci odaklı öğretime kaydığı için, İngilizce'nin ikinci/yabancı dil olarak öğretimi alanındaki araştırmalar öğrenciler ve bireysel farklılıklarını kapsamaya başlamıştır. Test sonuçlarını etkileyen faktörlerden en önemlilerinden birisi öğrenci karakterleridir. Bu sebeple, bu çalışma bireysel farklılıklardan biri olan öz yeterliliğe yoğunlaşmaktadır. Araştırmanın odağını daraltmak amacıyla, bu makale öğrencilerin dinleme-algılamadaki öz yeterliliklerinin test performanslarındaki rolünü incelemeyi amaçlamıştır. Bu sebeple, ana araştırma sorusu şu olmuştur: 'İngilizce öğrencilerinin dinleme-algılamadaki öz yeterliliklerinin dinleme becerileriyle bir ilişkisi var mıdır?' Çalışmaya 61 üniversite öğrencisi katılmıştır. Öğrencilerin öz yeterlilikleri ile ilgili veri yazarlar tarafından hazırlanan bir anket ile toplanmıştır. Dinleme becerilerinin sayısal ölçümü için Longman TOEFL (2001, pp.3-6) testine verilen cevaplar kullanılmıştır. Analizin sonuçları dinleme-algılamadaki öz yeterliliğin dinleme becerisi ile önemli ölçüde ilişkili olduğunu göstermiştir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: Yabancı dil öğrenimi, öz yeterlilik, dinleme yeterliliği, öğrencilerin inançları

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The necessity in foreign language (FL) research and teaching to investigate learner's affective variables as a means of explaining differences in one's ability to learn a new language has been emphasized in recent years. Savignon (1983), for example, reviewed many affective studies and claimed that affective variables contribute more to the result of foreign or second language learning than do aptitude, intelligence, method of teaching used in the classroom, or time spent learning the language (see Kennedy et al., 2000, p. 279). Interest in affective issues in educational contexts is not new but has gained importance with the evolution of humanistic psychology in the 1960s when the purely cognitive theories of learning were rejected and the integration of cognition and affect was emphasized (Arnold & Brown, 1999). Affect has been considered by many scholars (e.g., Clement et al., 1994 and Gardner & Lambert, 1972) to be one of the main determining factors of success in learning foreign or second languages.

Affect involves variables such as attitudes, motivation, interest, learners' beliefs, needs, expectations, and prior experiences (McKenna et al., 1995, cited in Gee, 1999, p.3). As the given

definition shows, an overwhelming set of variables is implied in considering the affective side of foreign language learning. Within this complex web variables are learners' beliefs, which are the focus of the present study. Regarding the theoretical construct of learners' beliefs, different but nonetheless clearly related views have been produced. This study has been based on the model proposed by Yang (1999), as it seems to include all the elements emphasized in the other models. In Yang's model, beliefs are composed of two motivational and meta-cognitive dimensions. The components of the motivational dimension are learners' self-efficacy, their emotional reactions, i.e., their attitudes to FL learning, and their beliefs about the importance of learning a second language. Meta-cognitive dimension refers to learners' knowledge about foreign language learning and about themselves as foreign language learners. The researchers made an attempt to investigate the possible contribution of one of the components related to motivational dimension which, here, is self-efficacy.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

It is supposed by many English instructors that the low achievement of EFL learners is basically related to their low general aptitude. They believe that these learners do not have the special abilities required for academic studies in general and for English in particular. While we do not deny the role of intellectual abilities in learning a foreign language, the notion that aptitude is the whole story seems to be controversial. In fact, the relevant literature (Brown, 1987; Chastain, 1988) supports the idea that variation in foreign language learning can be explained by aptitude only to a certain extent. In this connection, Chastain (1988) posits that in addition to linguistic aptitude, there must be another equally important variable determining whether or not a student learns a foreign language. He continues, "the affective domain plays a larger role in developing second-language skills than does the cognitive because the emotions control the will to activate or shut down the cognitive function." (p. 122). A relevant view comes from Pajares (2000) who asserts that what people know, the skills they possess, or the attainments they have previously accomplished are often poor predictors of subsequent attainments because the beliefs they hold about their abilities and about the outcome of their efforts powerfully influence the ways in which they behave.

While there is ample reason to view affective issues as powerful variables which may strongly predict EFL learners' performance, a little attempt has been made to examine the variables as related to English achievement of Iranian EFL learners. This motivated us to focus on the effects of self-efficacy regarding a group of Iranian EFL learners' proficiency in listening skills. Therefore, the main research question addressed by the present study is 'Is there any significant relationship between a group of Iranian EFL learners' self-efficacy about listening comprehension and their listening proficiency?'

2. Literature review

Bernhard (1997) defines the concept of 'self-efficacy' as learners' beliefs about their abilities to accomplish a task. For Pajares (2000), it is the students' judgments of their academic competence. The concept is also defined by Ehrman (1996) as the degree to which the student thinks he or she has the capacity to cope with the learning challenge. (Cited in Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 16). If people have high positive self-efficacy about learning a second language, then they believe that they have the power and abilities to reach this goal. On the other hand, people with low self-efficacy feel that they do not have the power and abilities to learn a language, thus admitting failure from the start (Bernhardt, 1997).

Nearly two decades of research revealed that self beliefs are strong predictors of academic achievements so that a new wave of educational psychologists are calling for attention to self-beliefs related to their academic pursuits (Pajasres, 2000). Of all beliefs, self-efficacy is the most influential arbiter in human agency and plays powerful role in determining the choices people make, the effort they will persevere in the face of challenge, and the degree of anxiety or confidence they will bring to the task at hand (Bandura, 1986, p. 397). It is this perceived self-efficacy that helps explain why people's behaviors differ widely even when they have similar knowledge and skills.

The concept of self-efficacy is recognized by Oxford and Shearin (1994) as "a broadened

view of expectancy which is drawn from social cognition theory" (p.21). They define the term as "one's judgment of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (ibid). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy refers to "an individual's judgment about his or her ability to accomplish a given task or activity." (Cited in Choi et al. 2001, p. 1). For him, self-efficacy is a much more consistent predictor of behavior than any of the other closely related variables. This view is supported by Graham and Weiner (1995) (Cited in Pajares, 2000) who observed that the acquisition of new skills and the performance of previously learned skills have been related to efficacy beliefs at a level not found in any of the other expectancy constructs.

According to Pajares (2000), beliefs that individuals create and develop and hold to be true are vital forces in their success or failure in school. This would lead one to infer that research on achievement, on why students achieve or fail to achieve, and on why they do things they do in school should naturally focus, at least in great part, on students' self-efficacy beliefs.

According to Bandura (1986), self-beliefs affect behavior in four ways. First, they influence choice of behavior. He proposed that "our assessment of our own capabilities is basically responsible for the outcomes we expect and for the knowledge and skills we seek and require. Hence, self-efficacy is a more powerful determiner of the choices that individuals make" (p. 394). Second, self-beliefs help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity and how long they will persevere. Low self-efficacy in a student, for example, creates a self-doubt that may keep him away from trying. So, higher sense of efficacy results in a greater effort, expenditure, and persistence. The third way that self-beliefs influence human agency is by affecting an individual's thought patterns and emotional reactions. People with low efficacy, for example, may think that things are tougher than they really are. This belief may foster stress and may make them attribute failure in difficult tasks to deficient ability rather than to insufficient efforts. The last way self-beliefs influence behavior is by recognizing humans as producers rather than simply foretellers of behavior.

In addition to theoretical evidences, the relevant literature holds practical evidences of strong effects of self-efficacy beliefs on academic performances too. Based on her study on the key variables in language learning, Cotterall (1999) considered self-efficacy as a crucial variable in success of language learners.

Wigfield (1994, cited in Pintrich and Schunk, 1996) is one of the scholars who investigated the role of self-efficacy construct in achievement. The subjects in his study were given self-report measures of self-perceptions of ability and expectancy for success in math and English at the beginning of one school year and at the end of that same year. At the same time, the researcher also collected data on the students' actual achievement on standardized tests and course grades. The study showed that learners' self-perception of ability and their expectancies for success are the strongest predictors of subsequent grades in math and English.

To investigate the links between self-efficacy beliefs and language learning strategies, Magogwe and Oliver (2007) did a study on 480 students from primary schools, secondary schools, and a tertiary institution. A modified version of the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) developed by Oxford (1989) for collecting information on strategies and the Morgan-Jinks Student Efficacy Scale (MJSES) developed by Jinks and Morgan (1999) for collecting information on self-efficacy were used in this study. Findings of the research indicated that there is a significant and positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and overall use of language learning strategies for the students with the three proficiency levels mentioned.

Chen and Deborah (2007) contributed to this literature by conducting a research on the relationship between EFL learners' self-efficacy beliefs and English listening achievement. The study was conducted within college-level English listening comprehension classes at two large universities in Taiwan. The students' listening course grades were used as the students' listening proficiency level. A survey questionnaire which consisted of two sub-scales of 1) English listening self-efficacy scale constructed by the researcher, and 2) English anxiety and perceived English value scale adapted respectively from Betz's (1987) Mathematics Anxiety Scale (MAS) and Eccles' (1983) Student Attitude Questionnaire was performed in this study. Results of this study indicated that there was a significant and positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and listening achievement. The results also showed that students' self-efficacy beliefs were much stronger predicators of language performance in the area of listening than students' anxiety and perceived value were.

Siew and Wong (2005) surveyed the relationship between language learning self-efficacy and

language learning strategies, and carried out a study on Seventy-four graduate English-as-a-second-language (ESL) pre-service teachers (13 males, 61 females) from a teachers' college in Kuching, Sarawak, Malaysia. Two author-designed questionnaires, one on self-efficacy about English language learning and the other on language learning strategy use were used in this study. Pearson correlation coefficients showed that there was a significant positive relationship between language learning strategies and language self-efficacy. Interview findings were in agreement with the above findings. High self-efficacy pre-service teachers reported more frequent use of more number of language learning strategies than did low self-efficacy pre-service teachers.

As Pajares (2000) assert, the study of the concept of self-efficacy in relation to language achievement is still new and there has been little research in the area in comparison to the work done in other areas. Aim of this study is to explore effects of this salient concept on one of language skills which, here, is listening skill. In accordance with Nunnan (1998), listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning and all too often, it has been overlooked by its elder sister: speaking (cited in Anderson & Lynch, 1989).

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Sixty one undergraduate EFL learners learning English for a BA degree consented to participate in the current study. Of 61 students, 28 students were studying at the University of Kashan and, 33 students were studying at the Payamenur University of Naragh. All of the participants were English literature freshmen, with intermediate level, whose ages ranged between 19 and 23. Also all of them had passed at least four courses in EFL in high school. From 61 students, 18 were male and 43 were female. They took the research instruments as part of their class activities and consented to the collection of data from their records. The participants were selected randomly in this study.

3.2. Instrumentation

Two instruments were used to collect data in this study: One of them was an author-designed questionnaire on self-efficacy about listening comprehension. This questionnaire was constructed based on three questionnaires of *Beliefs About Language Learning* (BALLI) developed by Hortwiz (1985), Persian Adaptation of the General Self-efficacy Scale constructed by Nezami, Schwarzer and Jerusalem (1996) and Morgan-Links Student Efficacy Scale (MJSES) made by Jinks and Morgan (1999). The authors-designed questionnaire consisted of 20 Likert-scale items generated from items in the questionnaires mentioned and the additional items developed by the researchers themselves in accordance with research questions. The students were asked to read a statement and decide if they: (1) strongly disagree (2) moderately disagree (3) slightly disagree (4) moderately agree (5) strongly agree. The Cronbach alpha of this questionnaire was 0.73.

The other one was 'Listening Diagnostic Pre-test' adopted from paper-based Longman TOEFL test. This test consisted of thirty multiple-choice questions designed to measure the level of listening proficiency. The Cronbach alpha of this instrument was 0.69. (A sample of this test is presented in Appendix B)

Both instruments were pilot tested on a representative of 18 freshmen EFL learners who were not involved in the actual study.

3.3. Procedure

As it was mentioned in the section of instrumentation, one questionnaire on the students' self-efficacy and a multiple-choice test on listening proficiency were used for collecting data in the current study.

Before the administration of the two instruments, some demographical questions, including Name, Age, Major and Semester were added to both of them and, for the sake of clarity, the self-efficacy questionnaire was translated into Persian. For the reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, students were advised that their identities would be removed from the questionnaire and the test (by

the researcher) prior to data analysis and they would be assigned a code number to protect the students' privacy.

For administration of the listening test, the participants were asked to answer the questions of the test in a time-limitation of 20 minutes after listening to a tape, and then they were allowed to listen to it again for checking their answers.

The research instruments (the questionnaire and the test) were administered during one class session with the assistance of their relevant professors. The total response rate was 95.31%, because 61 out of 64 students responded to both research instruments.

4. Data analysis

In analyzing the data, some statistical procedures were carried out in this study: (1) Descriptive statistics including Cronbach alphas, means and standard deviations computed to summarize the students' responses to the self-efficacy questionnaire and listening comprehension test. (2) Pearson correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between the students' self-efficacy and listening proficiency (3) Paired sample T-Tests were done to explore the effects of high and low self-efficacy on listening proficiency.

5. Results and discussion

5.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 presents Cronbach alphas, means and standard deviations of the questionnaire and the test.

Table 1
Descriptive statistics of the self-efficacy questionnaire and listening comprehension test

| | Number of items | Cronbach's alpha | Mean | Standard deviation |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------|---------------------------|
| Self-efficacy Questionnaire | 20 | 0.73 | 47.36 | 5.812 |
| Listening comprehension test | 50 | 0.69 | 27.63 | 5.18 |

As it is shown in table 1, the reliability of the self-efficacy questionnaire designed for this study was 0.73 and that of the listening comprehension test selected for the present study was 0.69. The reliabilities of both research instruments were satisfactory. Means of the self-efficacy questionnaire and the listening test were 47.36 and 27.63, respectively.

5.2. Pearson Correlations

Table 2 contains the findings obtained from performing Pearson correlations between the total scores of the questionnaire and the test.

Table 2
Pearson correlation between the attitude questionnaire and the strategy use questionnaire

| Self-efficacy | Listening test scores |
|----------------------------|------------------------------|
| Pearson correlation | |