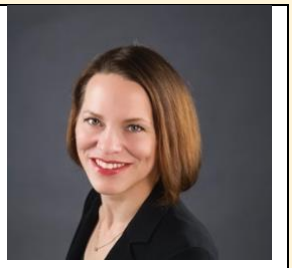
Think Tank: Self-Efficacy



Dawn Kobayashi

Using Self-efficacy to Build Student Confidence: Some Takeaways for Teachers

What's your favourite scene from the Harry Potter books or movies? For me, it is in *Harry Potter and the Half-blood Prince* when Harry tricks Ron into believing that he (Ron) has drunk *felix felicis* (a lucky potion). Ron goes on to be the star player in the Quidditch match, saving goal after goal. All because he believed that whatever he did would be successful. As you probably know, Ron hadn't actually drunk the potion; he just believed that he had. No magic was at work; his success was all down to the power of his belief. The belief that you can succeed at something is called self-efficacy, and the Ron / *felix felicis* scene is an excellent example of it at work.

A few years ago, I became interested in the potential of self-efficacy to help my university students believe in themselves. I was worried about them. Why, after six years of language study, did they still feel unable to engage in everyday conversation? I felt common explanations, that students lack motivation or that that's just the way Japanese students are, didn't really fit what I was seeing. In any case, as a teacher-researcher, I didn't only want to know the cause; I wanted to find a solution. So, I decided to talk to them. My students told me that it was not that they didn't want to speak English (they did-very much so!), but that they didn't believe they could become competent speakers of English. When I heard this, I remembered reading about self-efficacy in my graduate studies; it seemed to me that this could hold the key to why my students felt the way they did.

Self-efficacy and social cognitive theory

In 1977, Albert Bandura introduced self-efficacy as a part of social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory holds that behavioural, environmental, and physical factors influence human behaviour (Bandura, 1977). Bandura defined self-efficacy as people's beliefs about their ability to successfully complete tasks and make changes to their lives; he also said that it controls how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave (Bandura, 1994). I think this is aptly reflected in the quote

commonly attributed to Henry Ford: "Whether you think that you can or you can't, you're usually right" (Pajares, n.d.). People develop their self-efficacy by processing information from four sources: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states.

- *Mastery experiences* are someone's past experiences of success or failure with the task.
- *Vicarious experiences* are the chances they have had to watch other people perform the task.
- *Verbal persuasion* is the feedback, encouragement, and support that people receive about the task.
- *Physiological states* are people's emotional and physical reactions to performing the task.

Self-efficacy is domain specific, so you could have high self-efficacy to drive a car but have low self-efficacy to overhaul the engine. This is the main point that differentiates self-efficacy from other affective variables like self-esteem or self-confidence, which are personality traits. You can find out more about self-efficacy from this website curated by Dr. Frank Pajares. And you can learn more about motivational learning theories, including self-efficacy, at Dr. Ellen Usher's P20 motivation and Learning Lab.

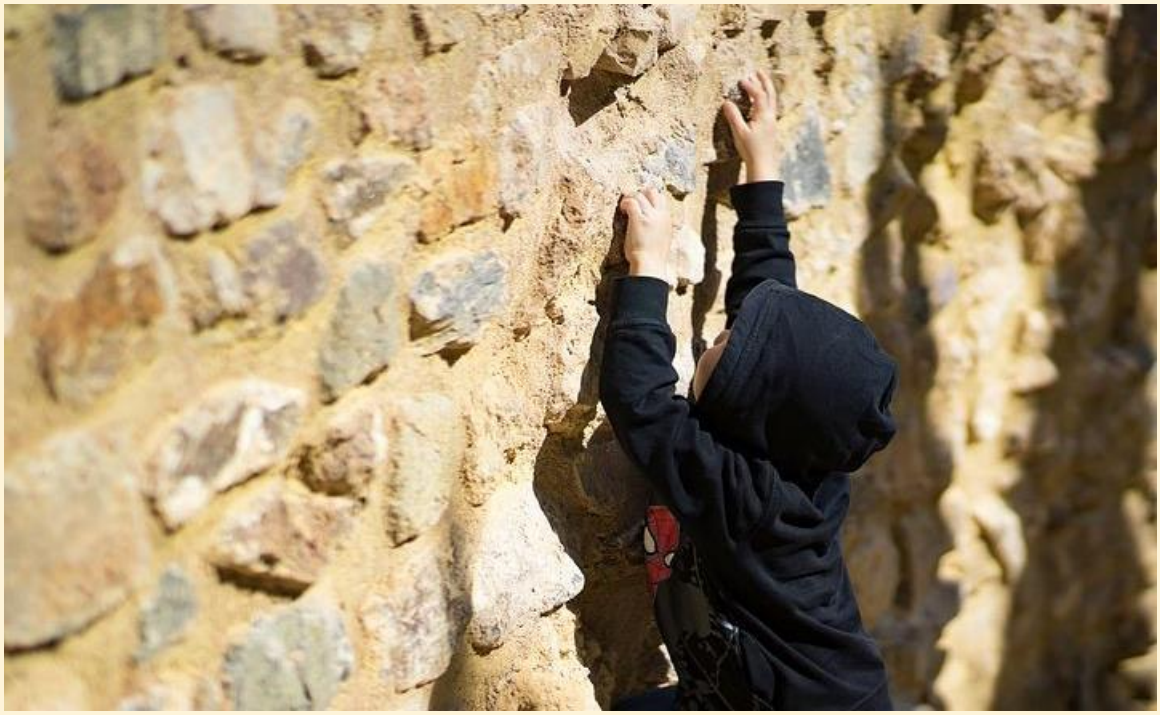
Bandura was originally researching how to change the negative behaviours of people who were scared of snakes. He found that he could change their behaviour by getting them to first complete simple tasks such as looking at photos of snakes or observing other people touching snakes. And at the end of the treatment program, his patients were picking up live snakes! You can watch this in action here (Jump to 19:50 and watch for about three minutes).The results were astonishing, and researchers soon began investigating how self-efficacy could improve outcomes in fields such as medicine, business, and education. Some of the most exciting findings from research into self-efficacy in education tell us that self-efficacy is one of the strongest predictors of attainment (Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Success depends on the task itself being possible, though: believing you can fly will not make it so! Of course, nothing works in isolation, and research shows us that self-efficacy combines with other affective factors such as anxiety, ideal L2 selves, and self-regulated learning to influence student achievement. We also know that self-efficacy can determine a range of factors from career choice, amount of effort exerted, and the kind of goals students set themselves to their motivation towards tasks. Raoofi, Tan, and Chan (2012) offer a recent review of research into self-efficacy in foreign language learning.

> ***Self-efficacy is useful for teachers because it was designed to change people's behaviour for the better.***

When I read once more about self-efficacy, I realised that if I made changes to my teaching approaches, then my students should begin to feel they can become competent speakers of English. Self-efficacy is so useful for teachers because it is designed to change people's behaviour for the better. So, I'd like to share with you some of the biggest takeaways for teachers I've found from research into self-efficacy and its sources.

Experiencing success is essential

Mastery experiences have repeatedly been found to be the strongest source of self-efficacy. Students primarily form their self-efficacy beliefs through past experiences of the task, whether positive or negative. This means that students need to have plenty of positive experiences with learning tasks. And the tasks themselves need to be sufficiently challenging to create a sense of accomplishment because tasks that require little effort do not raise self-efficacy. This means tasks should be achievable and be scaffolded so that they become progressively more challenging. I have also found that providing students with ample preparation time increases their chances of success.



Students need to see their peers succeed

Watching someone who you feel is similar to you successfully complete a task lets you start to believe that you could do it, too. These kinds of experiences are called vicarious or modelling experiences. Students must feel that they are similar to the other person for these observations to be effective. In many English classes, native speakers model the task for students. Although this gives students an excellent example of correct pronunciation, since the modelling is not done by a peer they do not develop the belief that they could perform to a similar level. We also know that watching people making great effort and persisting raises self-efficacy more than

seeing someone perform the task easily. This means students need to see other students struggle through a task. One way to do this (ethics rules permitting) is to make work completed by previous year groups available to current students. One of my students talked about being inspired by watching videos of former students perform speeches. Additionally, other students spoke about how motivating it was to see Japanese teachers of English use English actively in the classroom. To be clear, I believe that both native and non-native speaker teachers make valuable contributions to students' learning, but because students need role models they can identify with, we need to move away from native speakers as the sole source of language modelling.

Negative comments destroy student confidence

The feedback, support, and comments that teachers and peers give students about their abilities to do the task is called social or verbal persuasion. The comments that students have received in the past help form their self-efficacy to perform the task in the future. Therefore, if we remind students of their past successes and how hard they prepared for a task, then they are likely to feel positive about completing it. However, the feedback needs to be realistic. If we tell a low achieving student that they are a genius we are unlikely to raise their confidence, but if we remind them of how hard they have practised and give them concrete advice about how to improve, then we can. The effectiveness of the support also depends on the credibility of the person giving the advice. Students are likely to believe the advice of a respected teacher more than that of a fellow student.

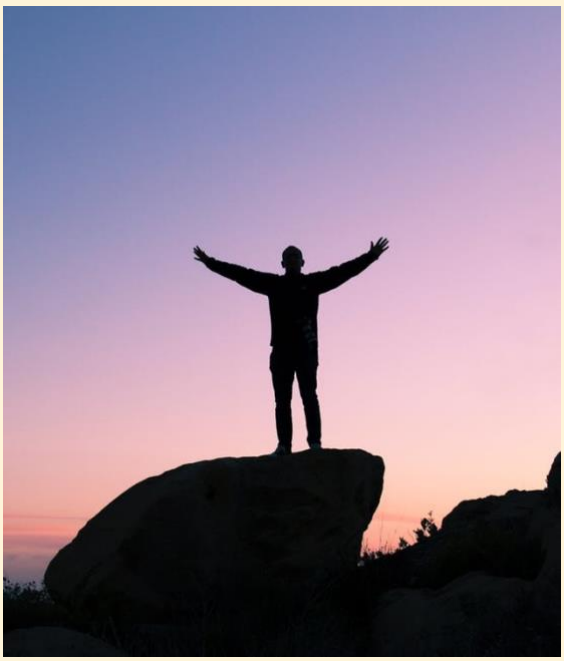
We also know that negative, overly critical comments can have a devastating effect on people's confidence. It is much easier to weaken a student’s self-efficacy than it is to build it (Britner & Pajares, 2006). I think we all know of someone who gave up a pursuit because of a misplaced comment by a teacher. Sadly, many of my students told me they felt they are terrible at English because of the negative comments of others. The lesson here is that we really need to think before we speak, and we need to ensure that we give critical feedback that is designed to build students' confidence,

> *once a student has developed robust self-efficacy, the occasional negative comment or bad experience will not dent their confidence.*

not tear it down. The good news is that once a student has developed robust self-efficacy, the occasional negative comment or bad experience will not dent their confidence.

You need to check how students are feeling

Our interpretations of our emotional and physical reactions to a task affect our self-efficacy levels. Everyone feels butterflies before speaking in public, but how do we interpret this? Do the butterflies mean that we are terrible or do they mean that this task is important to us, and we are eager to do a good job? For teachers, the implications are three-fold. First, we need to try and get students to not think about nervous reactions as a sign that they are about to fail but as a natural response to such situations. Second, we need to teach them relaxation strategies. For example, we can reduce student stress levels quickly just by asking them to stretch and smile. Finally, we need to reduce the number of stress-inducing situations in the classroom. This can be done by arranging desks in groups rather than rows and having students present to small groups rather than to the whole class. Also, we can develop a supportive, nurturing classroom environment by ensuring that the lighting and heating of the room are conducive to student learning and by assessing students holistically by focusing on what they can do rather than on their mistakes.



But...

One of the few criticisms I have of self-efficacy theory is that most studies come from Western contexts and researchers repeatedly assume that their results are transferrable to people all over the world. There is growing evidence that in Confucian societies like Japan, the importance of verbal support from in-group members on self-efficacy may be much higher than current research suggests. Some studies have found that verbal support from teachers and parents is more important to Chinese students' self-efficacy than positive learning experiences. There is not yet enough research to draw firm conclusions about this, but it makes sense for us to not only increase the number of positive learning experiences but also to ensure that we give students plenty of positive, constructive feedback and give fellow students opportunities to do the same.

I hope this Think Tank piece has given you some ideas about how you can tweak your teaching practice to help build your students' confidence. Self-efficacy might not be a magic potion, but it is a valuable tool for getting students to believe that they can succeed.

Dawn Kobayashi *is an English lecturer at Onomichi City University. She is also a doctoral candidate at the University of Liverpool. Her research interests are educational psychology, especially self-efficacy, speaking fluency, and drama in ELT. One day she will finally learn how to play the guitar.*

References

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review, 84*(2), 191–215. doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.84.2.191

Bandura, A. (1994). Self-efficacy. In V. S. Ramachaaudran (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of human behavior* (Vol. 4, pp. 71–81). New York, NY: Academic Press. Retrieved from: https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Bandura/BanEncy.html

Britner, S. L., & Pajares, F. (2006). Sources of science self-efficacy beliefs of middle school students. *Journal of Research in Science Teaching, 43*(5), 485–499. doi.org/10.1002/tea.20131

Pajares, F. (n.d.). Information on self-efficacy: A community of scholars [Webpage]. Retrieved from: http://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/self-efficacy.html

Raoofi, S., Tan, B. H., & Chan, S. H. (2012). Self-efficacy in second/foreign language learning contexts. *English Language Teaching*, *5*(11), 60–73. doi.org/10.5539/elt.v5n11p60

Zimmerman, B. J., Bandura, A., & Martinez-Pons, M. (1992). Self-motivation for academic attainment: The role of self-efficacy beliefs and personal goal setting. *American Educational Research Journal*, *29*(3), 663–676. doi.org/10.3102/00028312029003663

Editor's Note: Dawn also alerted us to this classic on self-efficacy: