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The interface between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their feedback on learners' writing, and learners' writing achievement

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Abstract

Given that providing feedback for learners' writings is a crucial and meaningful task for language teachers, the researcher intended to study the impact of the perceived sense of efficacy of the language on their practice in responding to learners' writings. To this end, a questionnaire of self efficacy was administered to 10 female teachers of advanced level. They were divided into two groups of teachers with high versus low sense of efficacy. In addition, 157 homogenized subjects who were already enrolled in these teachers' English classrooms were selected for the study. The teachers assigned a writing task with the same topic to their learners. The papers were collected and checked by the teachers the following session. Then the researcher analyzed the number and the type of the feedback points given on each paper. Afterwards a post test was administered to determine their writing achievement. Based on the results, the relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and the feedbacks on form and content of the writings and also those in the form of general comments turned out to be statistically significant. Besides, it was shown that there was a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the writing achievement of the students in each group.

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Keywords: self-efficacy; teachers' sense of efficacy; teacher feedback; feedback on form; feedback on content.

1. Introduction

Sense of efficacy as one of the self-referent beliefs directed toward perceived abilities is a major basis of action. Unless people believe they can produce desired effects by their actions, they have little incentive to act (Bandura, 1997). Plethora of studies has shown that sense of efficacy, as "a strong predictor of behaviour" (Bandura, 1997), would influence the whole educational system throughout the process of development and implementation of different policies of teaching (Goddard & Goddard, 2001; Friedman & Kass, 2002). Researchers investigating teacher efficacy have revealed that teacher's sense of efficacy as one of the most important personality traits has a positive and consistent relationship with teaching behaviors and the learners' outcomes (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk-Hoy, & Hoy, 1998), it has been related to teachers' commitment to teaching (Coladarci, 1992), and classroom management skills. It has been found that Efficacious teachers employ less teacher-directed but more

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whole-class instruction (Ashton and Webb, 1986) and adopt a more humanistic and less controlling orientation to teaching (Woolfolk and Hoy, 1990). Emmer and Hickman (1991) found that efficacy scores were positively correlated with the prospective teachers' tendencies for positive management strategies, for example talking with a student or revising assignments. In this line Gibson and Dembo (1984), found that teachers with higher sense of efficacy were less likely to criticize the students after incorrect responses and more likely to persist with the struggling students. Cooper (2001) asserts that the make up of a teacher's personality influences his/her action in the classroom, i.e., his/ her teaching style or teaching activities preferences.

On the other hand responding to students' writings is an important and meaningful area of teachers' work. In the writing classroom, teacher feedback is a valuable instructive device to enhance the teaching and learning of writing. In writing instruction 'feedback is input from a reader to a writer with the effect of providing information to the writer for revision'. And it could be in the form of comments, questions, and suggestions a reader gives writer to produce reader-based text as opposed to writer-based text. (Keh, 1990, p.294). Hyland and Hyland (2006) asserts that the informational load of the teacher written feedback is supposed to offer commentary on the form and content of a text to encourage students to develop their writing and improve their learning . According to Williams (2003) the most common methods of feedback on form are outright teacher correction of surface errors, teacher markings that indicate the place and type of error but without correction, and underlining to indicate only the presence of errors. Feedback on content consists mainly on comments written by teachers on drafts that usually point out problems and offer suggestions for improvement on future rewrites. Research investigating various aspects of ESL/EFL writing instruction has demonstrated that students expect and value their teachers' feedback on their writing (Cohen & Cavalcanti, 1990; Ferris, 1997; Hedgcock & Lefkowitz, 1996; Muncie, 2000, Schuls, 2001). Several recent studies favour corrective feedback, and indicate that if done appropriately it can be helpful in enhancing and accelerating language learning (Fathman & Whalley, 1990; Lalande, 1982; Lyster et al.,1999, cited in Schulz, 2001; Schulz, 2001). But methods such as outright correction of surface errors, inconsistently marking errors, unclear and vague responses on content have all been found to have little positive and some negative impact on students' writing skills. They can lead to feelings of confusion and frustration as well as passive action and indifference on behalf of the students. One line of argument influenced by process theories of writing, claims that feedback on error to L2 students is discouraging and generally fails to generate any improvement in their succeeding writings (Sheppard, 1992). In another report, Fathman and Whalley (1990), state that teacher feedback on content in the form of teacher comments is often vague, contradictory, unsystematic and inconsistent. On the other hand, the lack of positive, encouraging comments has been given as a reason for students' inattention to the feedback (Cohen & Cavalcant ,1990; Leki, 1990; Hillocks, 1982). Research examining actual teacher feedback has shown that some teachers focus more on local issues such as grammar and mechanics than on global issues such as content and organization (Ferris, 2004; Zamel, 1985). Such a focus may misrepresent both the importance of these issues and the importance teachers place on them.

Teachers' varied strategies and treatments in providing written feedback may lead to different results on the part of the learners. So in order to identify the factors that lead to efficient feedback it is essential to discover the most influential beliefs that affect teachers' practices, as research on teachers' beliefs has confirmed that beliefs have an important impact on teachers' actions (Lee, 2008). As a result one can find that the inefficacy of feedbacks, the teachers give to the students' writing can be the result of a combination of using inconsistent, unclear comments originated from the teachers' beliefs on the effectiveness of their teaching.

Having reviewed the related literature, the researcher concludes that teachers' sense of efficacy and feedback in writing are both seen in education as crucial for language teaching. Adding to this, their impact upon and relationship with students' achievement are emphasized by many scholars. Although many studies have been done on several variables that can contribute to the language teaching profession and teachers, no investigations have been carried out to study the possible relationship between the sense of efficacy of English teachers' and the type of feedback they provide for their learners' writings with regard to their students' achievement. Knowing that as EFL teachers we should probe into the problems, scrutinizing our own strategies in giving different types of feedbacks and the way we give the feedbacks and also find their possible relationships with students' achievement, the researcher decided to investigate the following questions.

1. Is there any relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their form focused feedback in writing?
2. Is there any relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their content based feedback in

writing?

3. Is there any relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their feedback in the form of general comments in writing?
4. Is there any relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their learners' achievement in writing?

2. The study

To find the answers of the research questions, 14 female teachers teaching at advanced level at an Institute in Tehran were given the questionnaire of self efficacy designed by (Tschannen- Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). During the administration of the instrument, it was announced that all the scores and opinions of the participants would be kept confidential and have no effect on their professional and educational conditions. From among these participants, 4 teachers were excluded from the study as they didn't fill out the questionnaire completely. So the remaining 10 teachers' data were analyzed. According to the median score, they were divided into two groups of teachers with high versus low sense of efficacy. Furthermore, the English language proficiency test was administered to the 178 students who were already enrolled in the classrooms, and those students whose scores were between 35 and 40 out of the 50 points which was one standard deviation above and one standard deviation below the mean score, were identified by the researcher to be homogeneous and were selected to take part in the study. The researcher chose one of the writing tasks in the learners' course book and asked the teachers to assign it to the learners. The learners were supposed to write a one paragraph essay of about 150 words with the same topic of "forms of traveling: traveling by plane, train, and car". And the teachers were asked to collect them the following session and to check the papers to give their feedbacks. By the time the papers of all ten classes were available, the researcher began to study the feedback points. The first step was to count all feedback points in each writings. Then the feedback points were categorized in three groups of feedback on form, feedback on content, and feedback in the form of general comments. As for the next step feedback points of each category were examined to find the number and the way the teachers gave feedbacks for each category. After examining every paper separately, the data were listed for each individual teacher. Afterwards, the whole data were studied to find the commonalities between the teachers of high self efficacy and the teachers of low self efficacy and find the most common types of feedback for each category in each group.

And for the final step, to find the general writing achievement of the learners participating in the groups, a test in the form of a writing task with a topic of "Kinds of countries: developed, developing, and under-develop" was given to students and was scored by two external raters who were teachers at the institute. And their criteria for scoring the papers were the syllabi of the institute. The total score for this task was 100.

3. Results

Before probing the research questions it should be noted that the teachers' sense of efficacy was measured through the questionnaire of self efficacy designed by (Tschannen- Moran & Woolfolk-Hoy, 2001). Based on the Median score of 6.73 on this questionnaire, the teachers were divided into two groups of high and low sense of efficacy levels. That is to say the teachers who scored 6.73 or higher were considered to enjoy high level of sense of efficacy while those who scored lower than the median comprise the low sense of efficacy group.

3.1. Results of testing the relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and their form focused feedback

In order to examine the relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and their form focused feedbacks, the feedback points of the two groups of teachers (low sense of efficacy and high sense of efficacy) on form were categorized into three types of direct, indirect coded, and indirect encoded. Also the total numbers of feedback points of each category were calculated.

Table 1: Frequencies and Percentages of Teachers' Sense of Efficacy and Form Focused Feedback

		CATEGORIES				
			DIRECT	INDIRECT Coded	INDIRECT UNCODED	Total
TSE	HIGH	Count	350	34	129	513
		% within TSE	68.2%	6.6%	25.1%	100.0%
	LOW	Count	375	0	0	375
		% within TSE	100.0%	.0%	.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	725	34	129	888
		% within TSE	81.6%	3.8%	14.5%	100.0%

As displayed in Table 1, teachers with high levels of efficacy have more tendency towards giving feedbacks on form than the teachers with lower sense of efficacy that is 513 feedback points for teachers with higher sense of efficacy and 375 feedback points for the teachers of lower sense of efficacy. Moreover the teachers who enjoyed a low level of sense of efficacy made more use of the direct form focused feedback (N=375) than the teachers with a high level of sense of efficacy (N=350). On the other hand, the teachers with low level of sense of efficacy did not use any indirect (N= 0) and un-coded (N=0) form focused feedbacks while the teachers with a high level of sense of efficacy made 34 indirect and 129 un-coded form focused feedbacks. As a whole in this table it is shown that the total number of feedback points given by all the ten teachers consists of 81.6% direct, 3.8% indirect coded, and 14.5% indirect encoded.

Based on these results it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their form focused feedback in writing. Thus the first null-hypothesis, as no significant relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their form focused feedback in writing, is rejected.

3.2. Results of testing the relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and their content based feedback

Table 2 illustrates the total number of content based feedbacks given by the teachers of two groups on learners' writings.

Table 2: Frequencies of Teachers' Sense of Efficacy and Content Focused Feedback

	Observed N	Expected N	Residual
HIGH	29	19.0	10.0
LOW	9	19.0	-10.0
Total	38		

As displayed in Table 2, the teachers who enjoyed a high level of sense of efficacy made more use of the content focused feedback (N=29) than the teachers with a low level of sense of efficacy (N=9). Based on these results, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their content focused feedback in writing. It should be noted that among all the comments, the total number of content based feedbacks on all 157 papers were 38. Thus the second-hypothesis, as no significant relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their content focused feedback in writing, is rejected.

3.3. *Results of testing the relationship between English teachers’ sense of efficacy and their feedback in the form of general comments*

Table 3 shows the number of feedback points in the form of general comments given by the teachers of the groups. These comments are categorized into two classes of encouraging and discouraging points.

Table 3: Frequencies and Percentages of Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy and their Feedback in the Form of General Comments

		CATEGORIES			
		ENCOURAGING	DISCOURAGING	Total	
TSE	HIGH	Count	38	26	64
		% within TSE	59.4%	40.6%	100.0%
	LOW	Count	0	29	29
		% within TSE	.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Total		Count	38	55	93
		%within TSE	40.9%	59.1%	100.0%

As displayed in Table 3, the teachers who enjoyed a high level of sense of efficacy made more use of the encouraging comments (N=38) than the teachers with a low level of sense of efficacy (N=0). On the other hand, the teachers with low level of sense of efficacy used more discouraging comments (N = 29) than the teachers with a high sense of efficacy (N=26). It was also shown that the general comments given by the teachers of the higher sense of efficacy group with the total number of 64 feedback points were more than the general comments of the lower sense of efficacy group with the total number of 29 feedback points. It should also be noted that as a whole from among all the general comments given by the ten teachers 40.9% were devoted to the encouraging category of feedbacks and 59.1% to the discouraging comments. Based on these results, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant relationship between English teachers’ sense of efficacy and their feedback in the form of general comments in writing. Thus the third null-hypothesis, as no significant relationship between English teachers’ sense of efficacy and their feedback in the form of general comments in writing, is rejected.

3.4. *Results of testing the relationship between English teachers’ sense of efficacy and their learners’ achievement in writing*

Table 4 illustrates the general achievement of the learners in both the two groups of high and low sense of efficacy teachers, showing the mean scores of the two groups’ achievement.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics Writing Achievement by Teachers’ Sense of Efficacy

		Group Statistics				
		TSE	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
WRITING	HIGH TSE		74	82.1562	7.34456	1.29835
	LOW TSE		83	70.6667	8.63013	1.50231

As displayed in Table 4, the EFL students whose teachers enjoyed high level of sense of efficacy outperformed the students whose teachers enjoyed low level of sense of efficacy. The mean scores for the two groups are 82.15 and 70.66 respectively. Based on these results, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant difference

between the mean scores of the students on the writing achievement who have been taught by low and high sense of efficacy teachers. Thus the fourth null-hypothesis, as no significant relationship between English teachers' sense of efficacy and their learners' achievement in writing, is rejected and it can be concluded that the level of sense of efficacy of the teachers have a statistically significant effect on the performance of the EFL learners on the writing achievement test. It should be noted that the two groups of the EFL learners enjoyed homogenous variances, i.e. they have been selected from the same population

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study hopefully turned out to be another step toward capturing the complexity of the sense of efficacy and feedbacks given by English teachers on learners writing. The increasing interest many view-holders and reformers have had in teacher efficacy is due to its positive and consistent association with many different aspects of education. In this light, it is abundantly clear that teacher efficacy has many positive and valuable contributions to make toward the overall pedagogical improvement in different aspects. In this regard, the findings can verify the work of other scholars and researchers. Teachers with high self-efficacy are likely to have a positive classroom environment, support students' ideas, and address students' needs. Teachers' self-efficacy is a significant predictor of student achievement (Ashton and Webb, 1986, cited in Schunk, 2004, p.119).

Based on the result of the present research, as a whole teachers tended more to direct feedbacks especially feedback on form. However teachers with high sense of efficacy used some indirect feedbacks on form. In addition feedbacks on content were in minority and in most of the parts were through requests for clarification; a few feedbacks on content were given by the teachers in the high self efficacy group, whereas the low self efficacy group had no feedback on content. Icy Lee (2008), in her study of the mismatches between teachers' belief and their written feedback practice found that more than 90 percent of the teacher feedbacks addressed form and less than 5 percent were on content. In the same way the present research got to the findings with about 87 percent of feedbacks on form and 3 percent of feedbacks on content. Furthermore, this research showed that this least amount of feedbacks on content was provided by the teachers of high sense of efficacy. On the other hand, Icy Lee's study (2008) indicated that 70 percent of the teachers' feedbacks were allocated to direct feedbacks, while this study found that about 80 percent of the feedbacks were in the direct form and 3.8 percent indirect coded and 14.5 indirect uncoded. Moreover it was shown that teachers with lower sense of efficacy tended to give more direct feedbacks in comparison to those of teachers with higher sense of efficacy.

In accordance to the result of the study by (Ashton& Webb, 1986) the teachers of high sense of efficacy use more encouraging comments in comparison to teachers of low sense of efficacy. And in the case of critics teachers of high sense of efficacy use more respectful phrases that mitigate the critics on the shortcomings. Besides, the findings of this study pointed out that less than 10 percent of the total 1019 feedback points were in the form of general comments provided by the teachers. The general comments provided by the teachers of high self efficacy group were more than twice as many as the ones given by the teachers of lower sense of efficacy. As a whole the general comments were 59.1 percent of discouraging basis and 40.9 percent encouraging. Besides, the encouraging comments were given more by the teachers of the high self efficacy group. This finding also confirms Icy Lee's (2008) finding about the error focused approach to written feedbacks by the teachers. In addition the results from the present research would indicate that there is a significant relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and the learners writing achievement.

The current findings provided new and valuable information about the relationship between teachers' sense of efficacy and the type of feedback they give to their learners' writings, and the writing achievement of their Iranian EFL learners. In sum the result of this study emphasized the idea that perceived self-efficacy is a strong predictor of behaviour, and that the different ways of providing written feedbacks on the part of the teachers can be originated from their belief on the effectiveness of their actions. Besides, it is important to stress that any conclusion should be interpreted in the light of the many limitations and delimitations that the researcher had in conducting the research.

It is obvious that several variables like teachers' experience, age, and other personality factors could not be controlled in this study. This study was limited to the female teachers and their students at advanced level of an Institute in Tehran. Other gender i.e. male teachers or learners are not included. Learners with proficiency levels other than advance are not included. The number of teachers available was limited. Also the study included just the adult learners.

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