Effects of Learners' Self-Efficacy on English Learning Achievement

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Abstract:

Self-efficacy measures one's beliefs about personal comprehension in a particular situation, which is a key mechanism in cognitive theory and plays an important role in learners' motivation and learning (Schunk, 2003). Therefore, this paper concentrates on studying the effect of a learner's self-efficacy on his final learning achievement in English area, and then analyzes how to cultivate students' self-efficacy to get further improvement.

Key Words: self-efficacy, effect, learning achievement

Introduction

Self-efficacy refers to beliefs about one's capability to learn or perform behaviors at designated levels (Bandura, 1986, 1997), and it is suggested in the research that self-efficacy is able to predict students' academic motivation as well as learning (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995, 1996). At the outset of learning activities, students with goals and a sense of self-efficacy have the capability to attain them. Many researches have investigated on the effects of one's self-efficacy on specific areas of English learning ability, such as reading and writing, but only a few focuses on the final learning achievement, which may have a close relationship with the motivation and goal of the English learners and show their learning results in a certain area. Therefore, this paper is conducted to investigate the correlation

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between the learners' self-efficacy and their learning achievement so as to offer a proof that teachers have to pay attention to their students' self-efficacy and then find a proper way to cultivate it to develop students' learning achievement.

Theoretical Framework

1. Cognitive Theory

Self-efficacy is part of a larger theoretical framework known as social cognitive theory, where self-efficacy is a key mechanism to postulate that students' learning achievement depends on interactions between personal behaviors, some factors, and environmental condition (Bandura, 1986, 1997). In terms of the connection between personal factors and behaviors, many researches show that students' self-efficacy affects such achievement as choice of tasks, effort, persistence, and achievement (Schunk, 1995). By contrast, students' behaviors can change efficacy beliefs, because as students work on tasks, they note their progress toward their goals, which enhances self-efficacy for continued learning. Students' behaviors and classroom environments also are related. Environmental influence on behavior occurs when students attach their attention without consciousness. Students' behaviors also can change their environments, because when students do not answer questions correctly, the teacher may reteach the lesson differently rather than continue with the original material. Personal and environmental factors affect one another. Students with high and low self-efficacy for learning perform differently in completing a task. Those with high efficacy may view the task as a challenge and work diligently to master it to create a productive classroom environment. Those with low efficacy may attempt to avoid the task and thus disrupt the classroom. The influence of environment on thought is evident when teachers give students feedback, which raises self-efficacy and sustains motivation for learning.

2. Four Sources of Self-Efficacy

According to Albert Bandura (1986, 1997), the critical sources of motivation are predictions about possible outcomes of behavior. People imagine future consequences based on past experiences and our observations of others. These predictions are affected by self-efficacy-our beliefs about our personal competence or effectiveness in a given area. And Bandura (1997) defines self-efficacy as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute

the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p.3).

Bandura identified four sources of self-efficacy expectations: mastery experience, physiological and emotional arousal, vicarious experience and social persuasion.

1) Mastery experiences are our own direct experiences-the most powerful source of efficacy information, according to which we say successes raise efficacy beliefs, while failures lower efficacy.

2) From physiological and emotional arousal people partly judge their capableness, strength, and vulnerability to dysfunction.

3) In vicarious experiences, accomplishments are modeled by someone else. The more closely the student identifies with the model, the greater the impact on self-efficacy.

4) Social persuasion may be a "pep talk" or specific performance feedback. A persuasive boost in self-efficacy can lead a student to make an effort, attempt new strategies, or try hard enough to succeed. And it can also counter occasional setbacks that might have instilled self-doubt and interrupted persistence.

Related studies

Schunk and Rice (1989) explored the effects on self-efficacy and reading comprehension of process (learning) and product (performance) goals among students with low reading skills. Students were taught a strategy to answer comprehension questions (finding main ideas) by an adult teacher who cognitively modeled (explained and demonstrated) the strategy. At the start of each lesson, some students received a process goal-learn to use the strategy, whereas others were given a product goal-answer questions. Children in a third (control) group were advised to work productively. Compared with control students, process and product goal children judged self-efficacy for answering comprehension questions higher, and process goal children demonstrated better comprehension.

In the research conducted by Howard Margolis and Patrick P. MCCabe in 2004, he argues: it is widely believed that without sufficiently high self-efficacy, or the belief that they can succeed on specific academic tasks like homework, many struggling learners will not make the effort needed to master academics. For students to meaningfully involve themselves in learning for sustained periods, sufficient self-efficacy is required. Understandably, many

struggling learners believe that academics mean failure and frustration—they have low self-efficacy for academics. To reverse this, teachers must recognize that low self-efficacy is not an immutable, global trait. Rather, it is a modifiable, task-specific set of beliefs derived largely from frequent failures. By matching task difficulty to struggling learners' instructional and independent levels, linking new work to recent successes, teaching them strategies that produce success, reinforcing effort and persistence, using peer models, stressing and teaching facilitative explanations for successes and failures, and helping them understand how schoolwork can help them achieve personally important goals, teachers can often strengthen struggling learners' self-efficacy. By doing so, teachers increase the likelihood that struggling learners will become more motivated, more involved, more persistent, and more successful learners.

Survey in Basic English Class of a College to Analyze the Correlation between Self-Efficacy and Learning Achievement

In the Basic English course in the class of a college, an examination on the relationship between students' self-efficacy expectation and their learning performances were conducted. At first a questionnaire was given to every student in the class to testify the expectation of self-efficacy. After collecting the data from the questionnaire, students were asked to complete some learning tasks to observe their motivation, capability and learning achievement. Results from the data analysis demonstrate that most of students, although they are not English majors, have a strong desire to achieve a high learning achievement in spite of a lack of confidence. Due to the insufficient knowledge in English, most of students find themselves a lack of interest in the learning process and thus lead to a negative effect on the direction of target. As a consequence, they are forced to finish the task assigned by the teacher without considering any other necessary work.

It is also found in the statistic that students' self-efficacy expectation is closely related to the grading from their college entrance examination. Those who with a higher grading express a stronger sense of self-efficacy while those with lower grading in exam show a relatively weaker sense of self-efficacy. In the process of the task they tried to finish, it is shown that self-efficacy has influences on one's motivation through goal setting. That is to

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say if we have a high sense of efficacy in a certain area, we will have higher goals, be less afraid of failure, and find new strategies when old ones fail. If our sense of efficacy is low, however, we may avoid a task altogether or give up easily when problems arise. Students with high efficacy may view the task as a challenge and work diligently to master it, thereby creating a productive classroom environment. Those with low efficacy may attempt to avoid the task, which can disrupt the classroom. The influence of environment on thought is evident when teachers give students feedback, which raises self-efficacy and sustains motivation for learning. And it offers evidences that self- efficacy will have influences on both learners' learning achievement in four aspects-listening, speaking, reading and writing.

Application to Cultivating Learners' Self-Efficacy

The preceding practices and results from survey suggest many potential applications to teaching.

One suggestion is to build self-efficacy by making students experience learning progress and success, exposing them to successful models, and providing encouraging feedback substantiated by success. Students' self-efficacy is set up on the basis of learning experience in the past, so the failure experience may cause suspect on their capacities and behaviors. Therefore, it is suggested to help students experience success to improve their self-efficacy. Teachers are required to set an averagely achievable goal to the students by considering their actual condition. Then teachers have to facilitate students to adopt proper learning strategies and apply what they have learned in practice. Besides, it is also teachers' role to help students analyze the main causes of the failure in the past and try to make a solution together for further improvement. In the research on self-efficacy and achievement, performance in school is improved and self-efficacy is increased when students adopt a short-term goal which is easier to judge the progress. Students are taught to use specific learning strategies such as outlining or summarizing that help focus attention and receive rewards based on performance, not just engagement, because performance rewards increase competence. Teachers can incorporate these sources of efficacy information into the classroom by teaching effective strategies to use during learning, employing social models, and providing progress feedback (e.g., ''you are doing much better''). Although actual performance successes exert strong

effects on self-efficacy, the vicarious and persuasive sources also are effective.

The second application is that teachers need to develop students' goal-setting and self-evaluation skills. Although goal setting can be offered by teachers, in order to improve learners' ability in a long run, direct instruction on goal setting may be necessary until students can set realistic goals for themselves. Complex skills slow the process in learning and are often frustrating. Students require strategies to keep them motivated to stay on task, so the perception of progress in learning is crucial. To achieve a higher self-efficacy, students should be organized to finish the task in learning process with a self-evaluative strategy. Group discussion is required in teams instead of doing it individually. After that, teachers need offer feedback to their performances and then provide an instruction on effective learning strategies. This can be done through a combination of modeling, guided practice, independent practice, and peer conferences. Peer conferences can be used in which peers provide feedback and suggestions for revisions. Teaching students strategies to improve their learning achievement builds self-efficacy. The belief that students know what to do to succeed at an academic task raises their efficacy for performing well. Further, the use of peer models provides an important vicarious source of efficacy information.

The third suggestion to improve self-efficacy is peers instruction. Effect of models on self-efficacy is powerful, especially the ability, experience and personal character of peers. Moreover, modern learning theory suggests that the construction of knowledge has a social nature, so cooperation in learning process is beneficial for learners to improve their current level. Therefore, team work is advocated in class to achieve higher learning efficiency and thus enables every student to upgrade his self-efficacy.

Conclusion

Self-efficacy is of great importance in developing students' motivation and thus improves their learning efficiency and achievement. In order to facilitate students achieve a higher self-efficacy, students should be organized in a learning group with peers whose learning ability are either higher or lower. With the effective discussion in learning group, students are easier to grasp the knowledge and with the help of teachers' feedback and instruction on effective learning strategies. All these factors obviously contribute to learners'

self-efficacy, which in return enhance their learning achievement.

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