

On the Viable Link between Reading Attitudes and Self-Efficacy: A Case of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract: This study aimed at exploring the relationship between EFL learner's self-efficacy and reading attitudes; also, the role of gender in reading attitudes and the difference between the self-efficacy of male and female participants were investigated. A group of twenty MA students of English Language Teaching from Azad University of Hamedan took part in the present study. Quantitative data were collected through two questionnaires of self-efficacy and reading attitudes. The results of the statistical analyses indicated that there was a meaningful relationship between reading attitudes and self-efficacy of Iranian EFL learners. In addition, gender had no role in reading attitudes and there was no difference between the self-efficacy of male and female participants of the study.

Key words: Iranian EFL learners, reading attitudes, self-efficacy

1. Introduction

After 1960s, following the emergence of cognitive psychology and the move away from teacher-centeredness towards learner-centered approaches, learner characteristics were considered the key in the learning process. As a result, new studies began to explore different individual factors which could lead to varied performance among the learners. Such factors as age, gender, intelligence, aptitude, self-esteem, inhibition, anxiety, motivation, WTC, identity and the like were investigated in order to justify the variation among different learners in the teaching/learning process. Among these variables, self-efficacy and attitude as the focus of the present research got increasing significance and drew the attention of many scholars. In fact, by growing interest towards teaching and learning English among different countries including Iran, many researchers attempted to explore the effect of such variables to see that whether they are effective in facilitating this process or not. Stoler (1992) considers self-efficacy a personal and affective variable which can exert a great influence on the learner performance. As defined by Bandura (1986), it is the evaluation a person has of his capability to manage actions required to reach successful levels of performance. Bandura (1993) believed that students, who believe their abilities, act more successfully in their educational performance. According to Tschannen-Moran, Hoy and Hoy (1998) self-efficacy is a future-oriented belief about the level of competence an individual expects he will exhibit in a given condition. Research shows that self-efficacy predicts students' academic motivation and learning (Pajares, 1996; Schunk, 1995, 1996). Three types of self-efficacy are introduced by Baron (2000): "self-regulatory self-efficacy (ability to resist peer pressure and avoid high-risk activities), social self-efficacy (ability to form and maintain relationships, be assertive and to engage in leisure time activities), and academic self-efficacy, which is the concern of the present paper (ability to do the course work, regulate learning activities and to meet expectations)" (as cited in Jabbarifar, 2011, p. 119).

Beside self-efficacy beliefs, the matter of learner's attitude is acknowledged as one of the most important factors that impact on learning a language (Fakeye, 2010). Gardner (2010) included the concept of *attitudes* as an important component of success in second language acquisition. Oskamp and Schultz (2005, p. 9) defined an attitude as a "predisposition to respond in a favorable or unfavorable manner with respect to a given attitude object". Learning occurs more easily when the learner has a positive attitude towards the language and learning (Chamber, 1999). In fact, having a positive attitude towards language learning should be extended to all the language skills and components. For instance, having a good mastery over the reading skill, as a major academic skill, not only requires you to be good enough in linguistic ability but also entails acquiring a positive attitude towards the reading process as well as the reading activity. Due to its high importance, a lot of research has been done on the reading component in the field of L2 reading; however, as Yamashita (2004) states the affective domain of reading has received much less attention than the cognitive domain. To develop good reading habits and encourage a liking of reading can enhance positive reading attitudes. Planning for effective English as second language (ESL) reading instruction requires good understanding of factors affecting reading ability in specific contexts, so that local needs, constraints, and learner variables can be adequately addressed. As Swalander and Taube (2007) maintain "good reading ability is the key to success in educational settings and this is why researchers try to find effective educational and psychological variables that can explain variations in reading ability and academic achievement" (p. 207). It is likely that the attitudes towards reading which L2 learners bring into the programme influence their performance or engagement in extensive reading (Yamashita, 2004, p. 1).

Taking a look at the available literature concerning L2 reading reveals that most studies especially in Iranian EFL context focus on the linguistic aspects of the process. At least, among the searched variables, there is certainly the linguistic component at the one hand. No research project can be found looking for the relationship between the individual cognitive or affective factors. Sometimes, away from the linguistic components, to be well provided merely with affective factors can pave the way for effective language learning. Therefore, this study is an attempt to investigate the existence of basic inter-relationship between the reading attitudes and self efficacy among Iranian advanced EFL learners with respect to the role of gender. The following research questions have been proposed for the present study:

Q1: Is there any statistically significant relationship between reading attitudes and self-efficacy of Iranian EFL learners?

Q2: Does gender have any statistically significant role in reading attitudes?

Q3: Is there any statistically significant difference between the self-efficacy of male and female participants?

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1 Reading Attitudes

Allport (1967) defines attitude as emotional and mental readiness or a preliminary tendency based on knowledge, experience, motivation, emotion or on any subject, social topic or event. Most of the researches show that the success in reading skills is closely correlated to the attitude towards reading (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000; Morgan & Fuchs, 2007; Wigfield & Asher, 2002). The concept of attitude, is an issue that is often studied in educational environments. According to Eagly and Chaiken (1993, p.1) attitude is "a psychological tendency that is expressed by evaluating a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor". Senemoglu (2004) points out that attitude is an internal situation that is acquired and has an affect on the selection of behavior. Based on these definitions, attitude can be defined as an cognitive manner that has emotional and sentimental side and affect on the person's decision regarding doing something or not. According to the resources (Masarogullari & Kocakgöl, 2011; McKenna, Kear, & Elisworth, 1995), the concept of attitude is made of three components which are emotional, cognitive and behavioral. The first one is the emotional that is made of emotional reactions towards the attitude. The second one is cognitive component that is made of ideas and believes that the individual has

about the attitude object. The third one is behavioral component that involves behaviors towards attitude.

Attitudes are emphasized heavily in studies of reading. Reading attitude is an important factor that affects students' reading achievement and in-class reading activities, and determines whether they will become independent readers or not (Logan & Johnston, 2009). Reading attitude is a complex theoretical construct. It is defined in various ways, for example, "a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation" (Alexander & Fuller, 1976) or "a state of mind, accompanied by feelings and emotions, that make reading more or less probable" (Smith, 1990).

Reading attitudes seem to emanate from perceptions acquired from people's reading history and experience (Guthrie & Greaney, 1991). It is argued that attitudes to reading are set early in the life of an individual, but they are not permanent, whether they are essentially positive or negative (McKenna et al., 1995). It is further suggested that reading attitudes seem to be more positive in the lower grades than in the higher grades. An increase in reading seems to improve not only a reader's reading ability but also a reader's attitude to reading.

Some attitudes are acquired through firsthand experiences with people, objects, situations, and issues. Others are acquired when children hear parents, family, friends, and teachers express positive or negative attitudes toward certain issues or people (Wood et al., 2007). According to Richek, List, and Lerner (1989), reading attitude is an essential factor for achievement in reading skills. Makas, Finnerty-Fried, Sugafoos, and Reiss (1988), in their study found that non disability students have positive attitude in reading. In other studies by Beck (1977), and Mullis and Jenkins (1990), respectively, they discovered that attitude affect motivation and reading achievement by increasing or decreasing the quantity of time that learners engage in reading. Students with poor attitude toward reading may not read when other choices such as video viewing exists (Martin, 1984).

2.2 Self-Efficacy in Language Learning

Learning a foreign language is a complex task, and its effectiveness may associate with different factors such as learner's own language proficiency, self-efficacy, and experience (Fahim, Hamidi, & Sarem, 2013; Khatib, Sarem, & Hamidi, 2012). For Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara and Pastorelli (1996), the self-efficacy theory is one aspect of social cognitive theory. The latter is an approach to understanding human cognition, action, motivation, and emotion. Self-efficacy was originally defined by Bandura (1977) as a specific type of expectancy concerned with a person's beliefs in his or her ability to perform a certain action or set of behaviors required to produce an outcome. In Bandura (1989), self-efficacy is viewed as people's beliefs about their abilities to exercise control over events that are likely to affect their lives, and their beliefs in their capabilities to put together the motivation, cognitive resources, and other action needed to control task demands. From this definition, one can understand that self-efficacy is not about the skills individuals possess to accomplish a task, but with judgments of what individuals can do with whatever skills they have. Efficacy is not a fixed ability that individuals have or don't have in their repertoire of behaviors; rather, it is "a generative capability in which cognitive, social, emotional and behavioral subskills must be organized and effectively orchestrated to serve innumerable purposes" Bandura (1997a, pp. 36-37).

Self-efficacy is the personal belief that students have about their ability to succeed at a particular task. Students who believe that they cannot learn to read despite making a considerable effort have low self-efficacy for reading; those who believe that they will become good readers if they make a modest effort have high self-efficacy for reading. Self-efficacy, also called perceived ability, refers to the confidence people have in their abilities for success in a given task. If they possess the ability to successfully perform, then that task will be attempted. The task will be avoided if it is perceived to be too difficult.

Four factors determine self-efficacy: enactive mastery experience, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and physiological and emotional states. The most influential of these factors is enactive mastery experience, which refers to individuals' experiences with success or failure in past situations. Information gathered from these experiences is then internalized.

Self-efficacy is a motivational variable in learning and it seems almost impossible to examine some aspects of human

functions such as learning, motivation and academic performance regardless of the role of self-efficacy beliefs of the learners (Pajares & Urdan, 2006). When learners observe their friend and peers perform a task successfully; they develop positive beliefs about their own capabilities in performing the task and hence this experience can enhance the learner's self-efficacy. Encouragement and positive feedback affects self-efficacy. Learners develop high self-efficacy concerning a specific task when they receive encouragement from mentors, advisors, or superiors who are valued for their expertise in the particular domain assessed.

Bandura (1997a) defines self-efficacy as referring to self-perceptions or beliefs of capability to learn or perform tasks at designated levels. (Bandura, 1993) explained self-efficacy judgments in reference to the learner's judgment of his or her competency for successful task completion. Huang and Shanmao (1996) define self-efficacy expectations as "the beliefs about one's ability to perform a given task or behavior successfully" (p. 3). Bandura (1997a) maintains that self-efficacy affects students' aspirations, their level of interest in academic work and accomplishments, and how well they prepare themselves for future careers. He identified two major types of self-efficacy. The first one is related to achievement in specific subject areas such as language or science. The second one is self-efficacy related to self-regulated learning and refers to the extent to which an individual feels successful on tasks that generalize across academic domains. Self-efficacy, as a key element of social cognitive theory, refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Self-efficacy in reading can also be supported by explicit instruction in previewing materials prior to reading (Chen & Graves, 1998). This is also a way to improve comprehension.

3. Method

3.1 Participants

Twenty MA students (10 males and 10 females) majoring in English Language Teaching from Azad University of Hamedan were selected through convenience sampling to take part in this study. Their age range was between 25 and 35, and they were all considered advanced EFL learners regarding their language proficiency level.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments for data collection were including two sets of questionnaires. In order to assess the participants' self-efficacy, the Persian Adaptation of General Self-efficacy Scale developed by Nezami, Schwarzer, and Jerusalem (1996) was used. It was administered to assess the students' self-beliefs. The scale consists of 10 items. Learners were asked to report on a scale of one to four. The choices ranged from *not at all true* to *exactly true*.

The second questionnaire was based on reading attitudes including 40 items focusing on the reading habits of the samples. Participants were asked to report on a scale of five to one. The choices ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* respectively.

3.3 Procedure

As mentioned above, twenty MA students, consisting of ten males and ten females, were chosen through convenience sampling during their normal class periods from Azad University of Hamedan. The instruments used in this study included two questionnaires: *the general self-efficacy scale* and *reading attitudes inventory* which required students to fill them out. Therefore, before the questionnaires were handed out, the researcher provided the students with adequate information concerning the purpose of the study, the structure of the questionnaire and the way to complete it, the importance of the study and the urgent need to reply attentively and accurately. Students were ensured that their names and features were kept confidential by the researcher. Then, the questionnaires were distributed and students were given enough time to perform the task carefully. During the process, the researcher moved around the students and answered their questions. The questionnaires were collected after 30 minutes.

4. Results

After the gathered data of the questionnaires were changed into interval data by assigning numbers to the scales on the questionnaires, The SPSS program (version 21) was used in order to analyze the data.

Research question 1: Looking for the relationship between reading attitudes and self-efficacy.

In order to see that whether there was a correlation between reading attitudes and self-efficacy of the learners, first the descriptive statistics for the two questionnaires were computed as seen in the following table:

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of the Two Questionnaires

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Reading attitude	169.4500	23.59410	20
Score Self-efficacy	30.9000	4.36373	20

As it can be seen in Table 1, the mean of reading attitudes and self-efficacy were 169.45 and 30.90 respectively. In order to see the correlation between the two questionnaires, the Pearson correlation was calculated as seen in Table 2 below:

Table 2

Pearson Correlations between Reading Attitudes and Self-Efficacy Scores

	Reading attitudes	Score Self-efficacy
Reading attitudes	Pearson Correlation	1
		.574**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
	N	20
Score Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.574**
		1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.008
	N	20

Table 2 shows the results of the Pearson correlation between reading attitudes and self-efficacy scores. As it can be seen, the correlation coefficient is .574 and P value (sig) is less than .05 ($p = .008 < .05$). Therefore, our null hypothesis which was "There is no relationship between reading attitudes and self-efficacy of Iranian EFL learners" is rejected and it can be concluded that there is a meaningful relationship between reading attitudes and self-efficacy of Iranian EFL learners.

Research question 2: Does gender play any role in reading attitudes?

In order to explore that whether gender plays any role in the reading attitudes of the learners, the descriptive statistics for the two groups were computed. See Table 3 below:

Table 3

Group Statistics for the Male / Female Reading Attitudes

	Male	Female	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Reading attitudes dimension1	male		10	167.5000	13.72143	4.33910
		Female	10	171.4000	31.28081	9.89186

Table 3 shows the mean score of the male and female learners filling out the reading attitudes questionnaire. As it can be seen, the means scores are 167.50 and 171.40 for male and female participants respectively. In order to find out whether there is a significant difference between male and female learners, an independent t-test should be run. Table 4 shows the results:

Table 4

Independent T-Test Results for Male and Female Learners

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Reading attitudes	Equal variances assumed	21.971	.000	-.361	18	.722
	Equal variances not assumed			-.361	12.340	.724

Table 4 shows the results of the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and the independent t-test. The assumption for administering the independent t-test is not met ($Sig = .000 < .05$, therefore, variances are not equal). Facing this situation, we look at the second row "equal variances not assumed". As it can be seen, the second P value is .724 which is much bigger than .05. Hence, it means that there's no significant difference between reading attitudes of male and female participants. Therefore, our null hypothesis which was "gender has no role in reading attitudes" was accepted.

Research question 3: Is there any difference between the self-efficacy of male and female participants of the study?

The third research question wants to see if there is any difference between male and female learners in their self-efficacy scores. See the descriptive statistics for the two groups below:

Table 5

Group Statistics for the Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

	Male	Female	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Score Self-efficacy dimension1	male		10	31.7000	4.16467	1.31698
		Female	10	30.1000	4.62961	1.46401

Table 5 shows the mean score of the male and female learners completing the self-efficacy questionnaire. As it can be seen, it is 31.70 and 30.10 for male and female participants respectively. In order to find out whether there is a significant difference between male and female learners regarding their self-efficacy, an independent t-test was run. Table 6 below shows the results:

Table 6
Independent T- Test Results for Male / Female Learners' Self-Efficacy

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
ScoreSelf-efficacy	Equal variances assumed	.423	.524	.813	18	.427
	Equal variances not assumed			.813	17.802	.427

Table 6 shows the results of the Levene's Test for Equality of Variances and the independent t-test. The assumption for administering the independent t-test is met ($\text{sig} = .524 > .05$, variances are equal). As it can be seen, the second P value is .427 which is much bigger than the .05 ($\text{sig} = .427 > .05$). Hence, it means that there's no significant difference between the self-efficacy of male and female participants. Therefore, our null hypothesis which was "there is no difference between the self-efficacy of male and female participants of the study" was accepted.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

In order to understand why some learners learn language more successfully than others with almost the same aptitude and capabilities, researchers have focused their attention on the learner's individual differences. The present study focused on two of these individual variables namely reading attitudes and self-efficacy.

Reading attitude is a complex theoretical construct. It is defined as "a system of feelings related to reading which causes the learner to approach or avoid a reading situation" (Alexander & Filler, 1976) or "a state of mind accompanied by feelings and emotions that make reading more or less probable" (Smith, 1990, p. 215) and Self-efficacy is a key element of social cognitive theory that refers to "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura, 1997, p. 3). Learners' beliefs in their capabilities affect performance tremendously. Learners' beliefs can predict performance better than their real ability (Bandura, 1997).

The studies show that little attention has been paid on the relationship between reading attitudes and self-efficacy among Iranian learners of English and little research has investigated issues regarding the significant difference between the reading attitudes and self-efficacy of male and female Iranian learners.

The results of the present study showed that Hamadan University student's scores on the general self-efficacy scale correlate significantly with their scores on reading attitudes questionnaire. Therefore, findings of previous studies on relationship between self-efficacy and reading attitudes which demonstrated a positive correlation between them were replicated here. The finding of this study also showed that there was no significant difference of gender in reading attitudes as well as in self-efficacy of Hamadanian students. The result of this study cannot be generalized because the samples are not too much and further studies are needed in order to generalize the result of this study.

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