

Rethinking the Potentiality of Self-Efficacy Beliefs for Foreign Language Learning in Saudi Arabia

Malak Almohammadi

King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

University of Exeter, Exeter, United Kingdom

Abstract

The increasing global and local significance of the English language highlights the need to improve the effectiveness of language instruction and learning in EFL (English as a foreign language) contexts. Recognizing the importance of affective variables, beliefs, in language learning is a critical part of educational advancement. This paper is based on a review that takes the opportunity to articulate the potentiality of efficacy beliefs to foreign language learning in Saudi Arabia. The review starts by indicating the potentiality of these beliefs as they explain and predict human behavior. It then addresses its criticality in relation to the troubling issue of poor performance. The review then emphasizes the value of these beliefs with regard to the 2030 vision and its concern with human capital, capitalizing on the role of educational institutes to enhance these beliefs. The researcher also discusses the potential of efficacy beliefs as determinants of choice and persistence and the role they can play in maximizing learners' access to the abundant online opportunities.

1. Introduction

The research work provides an outlook on the long-standing troubling problem of low language performance in the context of Saudi Arabia. The importance of this review is that it offers an alternative perspective on the problem by considering a psychological mechanism that is thought to be associated with and predict outcomes. This review postulates the potentiality of self-efficacy since the past decades have witnessed great advances in the fields of sport, health, and education with the introduction of self-efficacy theory as a key element in social cognitive theory. With regards to education, self-efficacy has been repeatedly reported to be associated with achievement. The upcoming subsections further delineate the criticality and potentiality of self-efficacy beliefs, particularly in light of the 2030 Saudi Vision and the abundance of online language learning opportunities.

2. Literature Review

As English continues to gain importance globally, the significance of the English language is increasing in EFL contexts, including Saudi Arabia. This

emphasis is influenced by many factors, including the realization that today a country's capital is knowledge-based and that many countries compete internationally on both economic and academic levels. A number of countries have had to make significant changes to their education systems, and Saudi Arabia is no exception. One example is the increasing trend of internationalizing higher education across many faculties and teaching different subjects in English across different universities. Since English is a foreign language (EFL) and not a second language there, the recent increased emphasis on English presents a challenge to students since they have limited exposure to the language [1]. For university students in particular, English plays a crucial role in determining their success and progress in educational pursuits since many students enroll in faculties where English is the medium of instruction. As for performance, learners' English performance, in Saudi Arabia, is believed to be below expectations despite prolonged teaching years and educational efforts. According to the Education First English Proficiency Index 2020 study, Saudi Arabia's proficiency ranking is relatively poor, ranking 97 out of 100 countries [2]. This is not a Saudi concern; it has been reported in many settings where English is taught as a foreign language and has been recognized as a problem for decades [3], [4]. Continuous attempts have been made to improve learners' performance at several universities in Saudi Arabia. Textbooks, for example, have been obtained from well-known companies such as NorthStar, McGraw Hill Higher Education, Pearson, Oxford University Press, Infonomics Society, and most recently, Cambridge University Press. Changes have not been restricted to textbooks; efforts to integrate technology into language teaching have been ongoing. This has included the creation of computer labs dedicated to English teaching and learning. Furthermore, teachers are occasionally provided with training opportunities to help them develop their teaching competences and skills. While teachers are given training, struggling students are given other types of assistance. An "Academic Support Unit" has been formed to provide low-performing pupils with academic support and one-on-one tutoring [5]. These efforts must not go unnoticed in many educational institutions, but educational outcomes, especially English-language

performance, continue to fall short of expectations [6].

With this troubling problem of low language performance and considering the efforts exerted to develop learners' competencies, there may be a need to take a broader look at the efforts made and reconsider other areas for development. There is a pressing need to consider learners' psychological needs, given their determining role in the success of the process of learning. This includes learners' self-efficacy beliefs because possessing limiting efficacy beliefs is believed to negatively impact learners' educational pursuits. This, in turn, has serious implications not only for education but also for the well-being and prosperity of individuals and societies throughout their lives. And it is acknowledged that learners' beliefs can cripple them regardless of their superior cognitive abilities or remarkable skills. Possessing low self-belief costs more than just the individual and has a detrimental influence on society: as Bandura [7] states: "intellectually deficient youth become occupationally disadvantaged society".

Self-efficacy theory is concerned with human functioning; it explains and predicts human behavior. It entails that human behavior is directly influenced by efficacy beliefs. They influence the thoughts, emotions, and actions of the individual. They determine what individuals seek, how much work they exert, and their tenacity in the face of obstacles. They also determine whether people's cognitive patterns are positive or negative, as well as the degree of despair or anxiety they may experience when presented with a challenging scenario.

Efficacy beliefs do not only predict a person's future performance; they actively influence how people contribute to the actions they take. Efficacy beliefs do this by influencing a person's mental processes, motivation level, and affective and psychological states. These procedures are choreographed, resulting in efficient operations. Individuals with a low sense of efficacy in a given subject, for example, are more likely to underperform than those with a high belief in their talents for the following reasons; they are more inclined to avoid tasks that they believe to be beyond their ability; they struggle to motivate themselves and readily give up when disparities occur; and they linger on their perceived inefficacy rather than focusing on the tasks at hand, making them prone to stress and worry [7].

For language learning in particular, learners' efficacy beliefs are important because restricting beliefs can put an end to learners' educational aspirations and cause them to miss out on learning opportunities. And, in an era of digital proliferation and a plethora of online learning alternatives, such cases are vexing. Given the unavailability of real English material and the absence of an English-speaking population in EFL environments, digital learning options are crucial.

To equip learners with positive efficacy beliefs, educational institutions play an important role since their contribution is not limited to explicit teaching input. They are crucial sites with the capacity to instill positive efficacy beliefs, allowing individuals, in turn, to be lifelong learners and equipping them with the required beliefs for putting their skills and cognitive capacities to use [7].

In light of the preceding considerations, this paper addresses the potentiality of considering language learners' efficacy beliefs in the context of Saudi Arabia. This proposition is based on a number of local issues, including the outcomes of Saudi Arabia's educational system, the abundance of online learning possibilities, and the Saudi Vision 2030 national reform plan. The following subsections address each point in detail.

3. Methodology

This paper discusses the potentiality of self-efficacy for language learning in Saudi Arabia. The fact findings herewith necessitate reviewing the current linguistic, educational and political arenas in the context of Saudi Arabia as well as reviewing the potentiality of self-efficacy theory as one of the prominent theories in psychology in the 20th century based on literature review, case studies and internet knowledge gathering.

4. The Outcomes of the Education System in Saudi Arabia

The first reason to address learners' self-efficacy beliefs is the issue of poor learning results in Saudi Arabia's educational system in general, and English learning in particular. The educational process as well as the outcomes have been widely criticized. Educational experts, for example, argue that Saudi Arabia's education system has failed in terms of outcome quality [8]. This is relevant not only to general education, but also to language learning and higher education, as Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi [6] pointed out that while higher education graduates may not be lacking in knowledge, there is a clear lack of essential skills, such as English conversation and critical thinking. There appears to be an acknowledgement of the poor outcomes of general and higher education, as well as poor language proficiency.

Low language performance of EFL learners is not a new issue; it has existed for decades in Saudi Arabia and many other EFL countries [1], [4]. According to a recent assessment published by Education First (EF), the world's largest rating of countries by English skills, Saudi Arabia placed 97 out of 100 countries, which is very low. The most recent assessment by EF, issued in 2021, revealed no discernible improvements,

with the country still ranked 104 out of 112 countries [2].

As a result of the concerning outcomes pointed out above, the Ministry of Education (MoE) met with many of the country's boards to tackle the issue of students' low performance. Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi [6] stated that the MoE held conferences with the "Ministry of Labour, Ministry of Economic and Planning and the Ministry of Civil Service, in addition to representatives from large Saudi companies, chambers of commerce and industry, academics from all universities, and international speakers to discuss and find solutions to the unsatisfactory outcomes of English education programmes across the country". According to Barnawi and Al-Hawsawi [6], these consultations were mostly focused on curriculum, instructional methods, teacher preparation, and the incorporation of technology. This is thought to be limited and shallow since it ignores other equally significant and vital topics, such as the impact of English and globalization on educational policy. Indeed, the discussions have largely ignored not only language policy, but also another critical component of the language-learning process: the learners themselves. There have been scholarly discussions over Saudi Arabia's dismal learning outcomes. It is suggested that educational policy involving English teaching is confusing and lacks clarity, and that it would benefit immensely from a complete framework with clear short- and long-term objectives. Furthermore, as a policy, it "should also articulate required knowledge, attributes, awareness and skills they have to develop" [6]. Indeed, learning should not be limited to material, since successful tactics must be considered while implementing language learning plans [11]. I would suggest that effective tactics cannot be reductionist or shallow; a good approach must focus on learners, culture, and values rather than merely updating textbooks and installing technology. So there appears to be agreement on the significance of broadening the focus of attention paid to language learning to include the learner and the desired traits that lead to good learning. Particularly as the MoE considers that one of the difficulties that it faces is that learners lack some of the basic abilities that promote learning [9].

The preceding discussion demonstrates that learning outcomes in Saudi Arabia, particularly in English, are poor. It is also noted that the existing language strategy is unclear and should focus more on other components, namely learners. Another reason to do so is the Saudi Arabia's 2030 Vision, which is committed to investing in human resources, particularly learners. A recent MoE report stated explicitly its interest in making the student the center of the educational process, as well as the necessity to equip learners with necessary skills, work on their personalities, and enhance their faith and confidence in themselves [9]. With this acknowledgement, it can

thus be argued that self-efficacy beliefs may well contribute to the advancement of the educational process in the country, and the following sections shall demonstrate and develop this point further.

5. The 2030 Vision and its Emphasis on Human Capital

The national 2030 reform plan is another reason why self-efficacy beliefs should be taken into account in Saudi Arabia. The 2030 Vision, which recognizes the value of investing in human capital, is a massive strategic plan that focuses on several sectors in Saudi Arabia. On the educational level, it is interested in investing in education as well as empowering and equipping learners with the skills and beliefs needed to be constructive members of their communities [9].

Simultaneously, the 2030 Vision recognizes the significance of English in the development and transmission of knowledge in today's world. The vision expressly recognizes the importance of high-quality education as well as competent language users. There have already been some promising initiatives, such as introducing the English language at the primary school level, launching an English education development programme, and education for a career, all of which indicate an emphasis on learning English as a foreign language and improving its delivery quality [10].

Similarly, there is a growing trend in the country's universities and colleges to employ English as a language of instruction in higher education facilities. This appears to be consistent with a strong desire to internationalize education and elevate its quality to meet high, globally recognized standards. This is understandable given that knowledge is now the capital of nations, and English is a means of gaining access to rich sources of knowledge [6], [11]. I would suggest that considering learners' self-efficacy beliefs may well contribute favorably to the implementation and success of the 2030 Vision, as will be discussed shortly.

6. The Abundance of Online English Language Learning Opportunities

Saudi Arabia is an EFL context, which indicates that the language is taught in institutional or academic settings, and learners have no access to English-speaking communities [1]. This means that access to the English language is extremely limited, as opposed to in English as a Second Language (ESL) environments, where options for learning and communicating in English are practically unlimited. In EFL environments, limited exposure to English limits learning opportunities. Indeed, Fareh [4] examined the topic of failure to deliver English-language programmes and found that it is not limited

to Saudi Arabia, but is widespread throughout the Arab world, despite significant efforts emphasizing the importance of exposure to the target language.

Fortunately, with technical advancements and the widespread use of the internet, exposure to English is now quite feasible. There are numerous learning possibilities available online. Making use of existing language-learning opportunities would undoubtedly improve language-learning outcomes and compensate for formal education's deficiencies. Nonetheless, it is common to hear that pupils are unmotivated to study or are even unwilling to learn [4], [12]. Regardless of how many learning opportunities are provided, they are useless unless learners use them. Only then will these opportunities result in the intended outcomes.

7. The Potentiality of Self-Efficacy Beliefs

Before bringing together the points mentioned above to highlight the potential of considering efficacy beliefs in the Saudi context, it is important to note that these beliefs are not some magical panacea that will solve the educational system's issues. However, because there are ongoing appeals from experts, educators, and business owners to enhance learning outcomes, reforming education is a first step toward national development [8], and self-efficacy beliefs play a key role. This is presumed because many who advocate for educational reform emphasize that they want graduates to have the skills and attitudes required for success, as well as the ability to educate themselves for life-long learning. This is what a student with strong self-efficacy beliefs can accomplish [7], [8].

The issue of learners' poor learning outcomes is the first reason why self-efficacy beliefs are thought to have considerable potential. Language experts' concerns include pupils' lack of basic learning skills and poor performance, and it has been suggested that language-learning policies be expanded to include supplying learners with the desirable traits that can contribute to greater learning in order to improve language learning outcomes. The researcher believes that investing in boosting learners' efficacy is worthwhile. Positive changes are more likely to occur if learners' self-efficacy beliefs are addressed. Self-efficacy beliefs are thought to not only contribute to the ideal characteristics that make a better learner, but they are also linked to strategy use, motivation, performance and enhanced learning outcomes [13], [14], [15]. A recent meta-analysis revealed a consistent favorable relationship between learning outcomes and learners' positive efficacy beliefs. Learners with low self-efficacy views, on the other hand, did poorly [15]. This is to be expected, given that these beliefs are thought to influence learners' effort and persistence.

The second reason to integrate learners' efficacy beliefs is Saudi Arabia's national 2030 Vision reform

plan, which places a strong emphasis on human capital investment and recognizes the potential of students at various stages of education. Indeed, educational institutions have the potential to play a significant role in supporting the country's vision and investing in human capital as the country moves toward a knowledge-based economy. This assumption is supported by two key reasons: first, students spend almost half of their waking time at school, and second, educational institutions are the appropriate places to address learners' efficacy beliefs. Bandura [7] remarked that "school is the place where children develop cognitive competencies and acquire the knowledge and problem-solving skills essential for participating effectively in societies". One might wonder how self-efficacy might help. Educational institutions may already be providing learners with knowledge and skills, which may be considered their current purpose, but this is far from sufficient. This is assumed because unless the knowledge and skills are accompanied by empowering self-efficacy beliefs, they are unlikely to take learners far: Bandura [7] warned that "skills can be easily overruled by self-doubts, so that even highly talented individuals make poor use of their capabilities under circumstances that undermine their beliefs in themselves". Indeed, Sahil and Hashim [16] indicated that educational institute outcomes are enhanced when learners feel supported and have faith in their capabilities. Ordinary students can achieve amazing results when their knowledge and talent are accompanied by strong faith in their own abilities. These pupils will eventually become working adults and have a positive influence on their communities, which stresses the potentiality of efficacy beliefs for the 2030 Vision because "A society with a poorly educated workforce cannot compete successfully in the international marketplace" [7].

The third reason why self-efficacy beliefs must be taken into account is particular to language learning and is associated with the availability of endless online learning possibilities. These opportunities will not be effective unless learners utilize them. Here, efficacy beliefs play a significant role; these beliefs have a strong direct impact on the motivational and selection processes of learners. Simply expressed, it is considered that learners are motivated and approach learning activities with a positive attitude when they have confidence in their ability to learn, and vice versa. Therefore, in order for students to pursue English learning outside of school, they need to have confidence in their capabilities, i.e., efficacy beliefs.

8. Conclusion

The growing importance of the English language globally and locally underscores the need to enhance the effectiveness of language teaching and learning in EFL settings. It is necessary to reconsider efforts to

improve language learning substantially. Recognizing the significance of affective variables in language learning is a crucial aspect of educational development. It is established that self-efficacy is the most influential factor in human agency and has a significant impact on the decisions people make, the effort they exert, and their resilience. Self-efficacy can serve as an effective educational technique for enhancing the outcomes of learning English as a foreign language.

This review established the potentiality of considering efficacy beliefs in relation to the issues addressed in the Saudi context. The Saudi context is concerned with the troubling problem of unsatisfying educational outcomes, including English, and research on efficacy beliefs showed that they are closely associated with performance and are a predictor of it. The Saudi context is also undergoing changes in light of the 2030 vision, which is concerned with human capital and efficacy beliefs can take individuals' knowledge and skills to new levels. These beliefs are also determinants of learners' choice of tasks, motivation, and persistence. Learners with high efficacy beliefs would readily engage in online learning and make use of endless learning opportunities that may well compensate for the deficiencies in formal education. Finally, "Each student matters, and a good educational system must improve the lives of its students regardless of their aptitude" [4].

9. References

- [1] Dornyei, Z. (1990). Conceptualizing motivation in foreign-language learning. *Language Learning*, 40(1), 45-78.
- [2] Education First. (2021). The world's largest ranking of countries and regions by English skills. <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/regions/middle-east/saudi-arabia/> (Access Date: 11 December 2022).
- [3] Dorney, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Fareh, S. (2010). Challenges of teaching English in the Arab world: Why can't EFL programs deliver as expected? *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2(2), 3600-3604.
- [5] Alghamdi, F., and Siddiqui, O. (2016). Supporting low-achieving EFL learners: Expectations, procedure and significance of remedial sessions at a Saudi university. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(12), 204-212.
- [6] Barnawi, O. Z., and Al-Hawsawi, S. (2017). English education policy in Saudi Arabia: English language education policy in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia: Current trends, issues and challenges. In R. Kirkpatrick (Ed.), *English language education policy in the Middle East and North Africa* (pp. 199-222) *Language Policy*, vol 13. Cham: Springer.
- [7] Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. New York: W.H. Freeman and Company.
- [8] Al-Essa, A. (2009). *Education reform in Saudi Arabia between the absence of political vision apprehension of the religious culture and disability of educational management*. Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Al Saqi.
- [9] Ministry of Education (2018). *Vision, Mission and Goals*. <https://www.moe.gov.sa/ar/Pages/default.aspx> (Access Date: 11 December 2022).
- [10] Le Ha, P., and Barnawi, O. Z. (2015). Where English, neoliberalism, desire and internationalization are alive and kicking: Higher education in Saudi Arabia today. *Language and Education*, 29(6), 545-565.
- [11] Faruk, S. (2013). English language teaching in Saudi Arabia: A world system perspective. *Scientific Bulletin of the Politehnica University of Timișoara Transactions on Modern Languages*, 12(2-2), 73-80.
- [12] Norton, B., and Syed, Z. (2003). TESOL in the Gulf: The sociocultural context of English language teaching in the Gulf. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37(2), 337-341.
- [13] Bai, B., Wang, J., and Nie, Y. (2021). Self-efficacy, task values and growth mindset: What has the most predictive power for primary school students' self-regulated learning in English writing and writing competence in an Asian confucian cultural context? *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 51(1), 65-84.
- [14] Hong, N. X., and Phan, N. T. T. (2020). Students' self-efficacy beliefs and TOEIC achievements in the Vietnamese context. *International Journal of Instruction*, 13(4), 67-86.
- [15] Talsma, K., Schüz, B., Schwarzer, R., and Norris, K. (2018). I believe; therefore I achieve (and vice versa): A meta-analytic cross-lagged panel analysis of self-efficacy and academic performance. *Learning and Individual Differences*, 61, 136-150.
- [16] Sahil, S. A. S., and Hashim, R. A. (2011). The role of social support in promoting adolescents' classroom cognitive engagement through academic self-efficacy. *Malaysian Journal of Learning and Instruction*, 8, 49-69.