

Teachers' Perceptions of Ability: Measuring Teacher Efficacy for Instructing the ESOL Student

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The intent of this study is to develop a valid and reliable measure of teacher efficacy as it pertains to teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL)—the Self-Efficacy for Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (SETESOL) scale. The timing for such an instrument is apropos. As the proportion of language minority students grows, a better understanding of the role that teacher beliefs play in meeting their academic needs becomes crucial. Minority groups are expected to account for nearly 50% of the U.S. population by 2040 with significant increases expected from individuals emigrating from regions where English is not the native language (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004c, 2004d). Unfortunately, there is currently a significant disparity between the academic outcomes of non-Hispanic Whites and some minority groups (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Clearly, there is need to have a better understanding of these students and their teachers if these needs are to be met.

Teacher Self-Efficacy

One way to better understand the education of students who are immigrating to the U. S. is through the lens of teacher self-efficacy. Teacher self-efficacy refers to a teacher's belief in her or his ability to bring about student engagement and learning outcomes—even when the students are challenging (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy note that teacher efficacy is associated with teacher characteristics such as persistence,

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enthusiasm, commitment, and instructional practices as well as student factors such as achievement, motivation, and self-efficacy beliefs. A teacher's sense of efficacy is "one of the few individual teacher characteristics that reliably predicts teacher practice and student outcomes" (Ross, Cousins, & Gadalla, 1996, p. 385). However, teacher efficacy is domain specific—that is, a teacher's belief in her or his ability to affect change in one area may not transfer to other areas. ESOL students present a unique set of challenges to overcome. Therefore, a valid measure of a teacher's sense of efficacy to bring about desired outcomes with ESOL students will tap into the specificity of this domain.

English as a Means and an End: The Specificity of Teaching ESOL

As noted, a reliable measure of self-efficacy is one that is not so broad as to cover a wide range of possibilities. Such an instrument has diminished predictive value (Pajares, 1996). TESOL instruction differs from other domains in several ways. First, language learning can be thought of as distinct from other kinds of learning in that language itself is involved in thinking. Indeed, most psychologists see language as essential in carrying out many kinds of thought (Carruthers, 2002). As such, language plays a role in shaping the way we think and is thought to be an important component of information processing and storage and seems to play a role in both working and long-term memory (Solso, MacLin, & Maclin, 2007). Both forms of memory can store information semantically. Semantic memory is an organized knowledge of facts, words, symbols, rules, formulas, and the relationships among them (Solso, MacLin, & MacLin). Language learning is different from other kinds of learning in that language itself is bound to thought and memory. In the language-learning classroom, English competency is an end as well as the means to achieve that end—it is the medium used for instruction. If students do not possess a certain level of English to understand classroom processes, instruction, or the

parameters that bind activities, then mastery of English will be an arduous process. A teacher who lacks the confidence in her or his ability to engage students, implement effective teaching strategies, or successfully manage the classroom in the students' non-native language is not going to progress student learning as efficiently as the teacher who does have this confidence.

In addition to being bound to thought, language is also bound to culture. According to Vygotsky (1978) language is the primary conduit by which one is enculturated. Language contributes to the formation of a community that adopts a somewhat different set of norms, beliefs, and practices. Other content areas are also framed within cultural knowledge. However, it is much more difficult to convey differing cultural concepts when the teacher does not have access to the students' native language, representing another obstacle for the ESOL instructor. A teacher who does not possess confidence in her or his pedagogical strategies to convey the cultural concepts needed for appropriate use of the language is going to have difficulty bridging gaps in understanding.

That language is tied to both thought and culture makes for a unique learning situation. If a language learner forgets how, or is unable, to frame a question when she does not understand the grammar point, then she is limited—unless she demonstrates an additional inability by asking in her native language. In this situation, she will have indicated a lack of understanding of the current material (i.e. the grammar point) as well as an inability to apply previously “learned” material (i.e. functional classroom language). Thus, in the language-learning environment, small problems can quickly become complicated. Foster (1997) notes that with language learning, students are often expected to be able to apply their learning immediately; they are expected to communicate.

Another aspect of the situation that makes teaching ESOL unique is that of student motivation. Hall and Verplaetse (2000) make two major distinctions between English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and ESOL students: “(a) the amount of exposure to input and opportunities for output, and (b) the learner’s probable motivation to engage in the additional language learning event” (p. 12). In other words, ESOL students have increased possibilities to engage in the target language and are more motivated to do so. In EFL, opportunities to speak the target language are largely limited to the classroom. In an ESOL context the learner is immersed in the target language and culture even when she or he steps out of the classroom. The EFL student may have a myriad of reasons for choosing to learn the target language. The ESOL student may be motivated by the survival benefits.

There are also several aspects to the larger context of teaching ESOL as opposed to other content areas. First, the cultural and language minority students that make up the ESOL class are over-represented among the poor (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2004a, 2004b). As such, they may be more mobile than their wealthier peers. As a result, teachers may not have the luxury of getting to know their ESOL students on an individual basis as much as their native-speaking students—language barriers aside. Second, ESOL education is often a controversial topic that may result in state-mandated reforms that drastically alter the approach schools take. A successful ESOL instructor may be one who not only can effectively engage students with appropriate instructional strategies in a well-managed classroom, but who can also adjust to policy changes with ease.

This also means being aware of the different contexts that learners find themselves in *outside* of the classroom. Norton Pierce (1995) stresses that an aspect of communicative competence is claiming the right to speak in the various roles that a learner may assume in the

larger social context. An effective teacher is one who encourages ESOL students to investigate opportunities to interact with native speakers and to reflect critically on these interactions (Norton Pierce). Interacting with native speakers and claiming the right to speak is vital for second language acquisition and a unique characteristic of ESOL.

Methods

Measures

Items for the SETESOL were based on the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES) (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). All items from the TSES were modified so participants would be primed to consider tasks in relation to ESOL students. Additional items were constructed to tap into tasks specific to TESOL (*c.f.* Hall & Verplaeste, 2000; Norton Pierce, 1995) resulting in 47 items in six *a priori* subscales. Instructions for the SETESOL direct the respondent to rate their beliefs about their ability to perform specific tasks on a 9-point Likert scale with anchors at 1—*not at all*, 3—*very little*, 5—*somewhat*, 7—*quite a bit*, and 9—*a great deal*.

Subscales of the SETESOL were: (a) instruction (19 items), (b) behavior management (8 items), (c) academic expectations (4 items), (d) motivation (3 items), (e) social cohesion (8 items), and (f) inter-classroom dynamics (5 items). Questions from the *instruction* subscale asked participants to rate their ability to catch students up to their peers in reading/writing or oral communication skills, or to prepare them for state-mandated standardized achievement tests. *Behavior management* items included rating one's ability to convey expectations of behavior, to control disruptive behavior, and to get students to follow rules. *Academic expectations* referred to one's ability to communicate the expectations for homework, for example. Items from the *motivation* subscale were designed to tap into perceived ability to get students to value learning,

and engage their interest. *Social cohesion* refers to a teacher's ability to get ESOL students to interact with their peers, and the extent to which they can get native English-speaking students to accept those learning ESOL. *Inter-classroom dynamics* refer to the ability to shape those forces outside, but impacting the classroom. For example, items asked about perceived ability to engage parents to partner with teachers in the learning process, or having influence as to policies shaping TESOL at the school or district level.

In addition to asking about beliefs in ability to perform the different aspects of teaching the ESOL student, items asked participants to consider student variables such as similarity of students' native language to English, whether or the student is a relatively active or passive member of the class, student motivation level, and whether the student is literate in her or his native language. See Table 1 for examples from each of the subscales.

Table 1
Sample SETESOL Items

Subscale	Item
Instruction	To what extent can you catch these students up to their ESL peers in reading/writing skills by the end of the year? It is four months from the end of the school year and you have a new student who is a recent immigrant from a region whose native language is similar to English.
	To what extent can you use a variety of assessment strategies in your ESL class?
Behavior Management	To what extent can you convey your expectations of classroom behavior to these students? It is four months from the end of the school year and you have a new student who only wants to communicate in his or her native language.
	To what extent can you get students to follow rules in your ESL classroom?
Academic Expectations	To what extent can you convey your expectations for academic tasks (ex. Assignments, homework, etc.) to these students? It is four months from the end of the school year and you have a new

	student who is shy and does not actively participate in class without encouragement.
	...is illiterate in his or her native language.
Motivation	To what extent can you motivate ESL students who show low interest in learning English?
	To what extent can you help your students' value learning English?
Social Cohesion	To what extent can you assure that a recent immigrant who is shy will be accepted by his or her ESL peers?
	To what extent can you effectively convey the ESL experience so that your non-ESL students understand and empathize with their ESL peers?
Inter-Classroom Dynamics	To what extent can you assist families in helping their children do well in their ESL class?
	To what extent can you can you have an impact on which policies are adopted regarding the education that ESL students receive in your district?

Items were further modified in response to recommendations from educational psychology and teacher education graduate students taking part in a research group as well as the professor—and expert in teacher efficacy—heading the group. Additionally, feedback was sought and incorporated from graduate students taking a course in studies in TESOL and bilingual education. In all, 47 items were constructed, plus 15 questions to obtain demographic information.

Procedures

Ninety-two, primarily white female participants from four teacher education programs from a large Midwestern university completed the SETESOL. Investigators informed participants that their responses would be confidential and that they would in no way be identified. Participants completed the SETESOL in conjunction with two other measures of

efficacy (a measure of multi-cultural efficacy, and efficacy for teaching students with disabilities). Surveys were completed and collected during class time in courses designed to prepare students for careers in education.

Results

Cronbach's α was performed to determine inter-item reliability and a principal components analysis with varimax rotation was formed to determine the presence of different factors operating within the measure. Cronbach's α indicated very high inter-item reliability (.973). The varimax rotation identified eight factors accounting for 77.788% of the variance (see Table 2). However, the eighth factor did not reveal any clear patterns with only two items having correlations $> .40$. As both items also showed correlations $> .40$ within the other factors, Factor 8 was dropped resulting in seven factors.

Table 2
SETESOL Factors

Factor	% of Variance
1	14.511
2	13.775
3	11.756
4	10.397
5	9.027
6	8.890
7	5.888
8	3.544

Principal Component Analysis using Varimax Rotation

The items loading strongly (i.e. $> .40$) onto Factor 1 included those primarily relating to behavior management, but also included items asking teachers to rate their ability to keep routines and activities running smoothly (e.g. "To what extent can you provide an alternative explanation or example when your ESL students are confused? To what extent can you respond to difficult questions from your students?"). Items from Factor 2 mapped onto the *social cohesion* subscale. Items loading strongly onto Factor 3 included those related to the conveying

of behavioral *and* academic expectations. Items from Factor 4 pertained to issues of instruction, while those from Factor 5 related to issues of motivation. Interestingly, two items constructed to tap into issues of instruction (i.e. “To what extent can you, in a single year, prepare ESL students in your class to take state-mandated, standardized achievement tests at the end of the year?” and “To what extent can you adopt new instructional techniques that the administration of board of education wants you to implement?”) and one item constructed to tap into inter-classroom dynamics (i.e. “To what extent can you assist families in helping their children do well in their ESL class?”) also correlated highly with items pertaining to motivation. Items loading onto Factor 7 included those believed to assess perceived ability to achieve outcomes related to inter-classroom dynamics. However, items relating to having influence with peers and parents did not load onto this factor while those pertaining to influencing policy (i.e. at the school, district, and state levels) did.

The presence of Factor 6 was not predicted. All items loading strongly onto this factor were constructed to pertain to issues of instruction. However, while items for this factor did relate to instruction, they also specifically pertained to issues of communication (e.g. “To what extent can you catch these students up to their ESL peers in reading/writing skills by the end of the year? It is four months from the end of the school year and you have a new student who is a recent immigrant from a region whose native language is similar to English?”).

Discussion

The results of this preliminary study support the notion that the SETESOL is a highly reliable instrument offering researchers seven subscales with which to more closely examine teacher efficacy as it pertains to instructing the ESOL student. However, the principal component analysis suggests that a reconceptualization of the subscales is called for. For example, items

loading strongly onto Factor 1 suggest that teachers view behavior management as something greater than the ability to handle behavioral issues as they occur, but is seen more broadly in terms of *how well they can handle the unexpected* as when students are confused or pose difficult questions. Being able to establish routines that result in activities that flow smoothly appears to be related to items asking about behavior management. Therefore, this factor may be better described in terms of *classroom management* since this entails far more than merely managing the behavior of students, but also includes coping with instructional challenges that could disrupt the flow of activities and processes.

One interesting finding was the three items constructed to tap into issues of instruction and inter-classroom dynamics, but instead correlated with those pertaining to motivation. There could be a couple of explanations for this. First, it could be that teachers saw these as motivational issues. For example, preparing students for state-mandated achievement tests may be perceived as more of a motivational challenge than one of instruction. However, all three of these items were presented either directly before or directly after items pertaining explicitly to motivation (e.g. "To what extent can you motivate ESOL students who show low interest in learning English?"). It is possible that the motivation items served as a primer in interpretation (though this is less likely with the items that preceded those pertaining to motivation).

Also of interest was that items pertaining to the *conveying* of behavior expectations correlated more strongly with being able to also convey *academic* expectations than they did to items related to *coping with violations* of expectations for appropriate behavior. Therefore, this factor may be better thought of as *conveying expectations* in general. Additionally, the presence of Factor 6 suggests that teachers may separate *communication* issues from instructional ones. Given the findings of this study, it may be more appropriate to label seven subscales accordingly:

(a) instruction, (b) classroom management, (c) conveying expectations, (d) motivation, (e) social cohesion, (f) inter-classroom dynamics, and (g) communication.

Implications, Limitations, and Future Directions

There are several limitations to this study that suggest direction for future research. First, while the high Cronbach's α suggests that items are honing in on the same construct, it also points to concerns with the scale's discriminant validity. Adding to this concern was the relatively small, homogeneous sample. In future versions of the scale, items could be included to better distinguish specific abilities within the construct of teacher efficacy as it pertains to teaching ESOL students. Additionally, all participants in this study were *pre-service* teachers. Future research needs to examine the beliefs of in-service teachers as well.

Another limitation of the study pertains to the wording of the items—specifically, items that asked participants about ability to perform tasks as they pertained to student variables. In other words, these items were likely *too* specific. Many ESOL classrooms are places where more than one language or culture is represented. To ask about specific student variables is asking the participant to imagine a particular student when responding to items rather than considering her or his ability to achieve an outcome for the classroom *as a whole*. Future versions of the scale should consider student variables as dependent variables rather than some imagined student the teacher may not have in her or his classroom. Including student variables also resulted in rather wordy items. The length of these items may contribute to rater fatigue, especially when used in conjunction with other measures.

Meskill (2005) notes that many teacher preparation coursework and professional development activities inadequately prepare teachers for working with ESOL students. However, training programs, such as the Training All Teachers Project, do appear to make at least short-

term changes in the beliefs that teachers may hold regarding ESOL students—specifically, teachers completing this program have a greater understanding and empathy for the experience of the ESOL student (Meskill). A measure of an instructor's sense of efficacy for teaching ESL students could provide researchers and teacher-trainers insights into perceived deficits preservice teachers may have resulting in more effective training programs. A self-efficacy measure specific to the domain of ESOL education would enable researchers to explore areas related to cultural and linguistic differences between teachers and students and the relationships between beliefs and the instructional, student engagement, and classroom practices that teachers implement.

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