Enhancing Self-efficacy Through Scaffolding

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Abstract: Self-efficacy, i.e. the belief that the person can successfully complete a task and control his own learning, plays an important role in how a learner effectively manages his own learning over time and across situations. This study focuses on self-efficacy of students who study writing in a distance learning mode because writing skills are difficult to do self-study. The skills also need feedback. The study aims to investigate learners' self-efficacy with their writing skills and online learning skills and how scaffolding, the support given during the learning process, enhanced both types of their self-efficacy. The study was conducted with distance learners who enrolled in an online English language writing course at one of the well-known English language tutorial schools in Bangkok. The research instruments included an online survey questionnaire, telephone interview and document analysis. The data from the questionnaire showed that learners' overall writing self-efficacy was low whereas their online learning self-efficacy seemed to be quite high. Data gathered through the telephone interviews revealed the learners' perceptions of the usefulness of scaffolding provided in the course and how the perceptions related to the area in which they have low efficacy. The findings can contribute to how scaffolding can be provided in the distance learning course.

Keywords: Self-efficacy, Scaffolding, Distance language learning

Introduction

As technology becomes more important for education, educators try to use it to design and support independent learning environments. Distance learning in the form of online learning has been used as a learning mode to provide an electronically supported instructional system to learners. This learning mode delivers instructional content and provides an arrangement of scaffolding or support features designed to give guidance and to support independent learning by using technology. Distance learning can be widely used to assist students in learning and becoming more active learners in many disciplines, including language learning.

In a distance language learning environment, students' beliefs in their abilities to achieve their learning goals or self-efficacy is a crucial construct. Self-efficacy is viewed as a key concept for predicting students' learning achievement and retention in most academic areas (Fencl & Scheel, 2005), including language learning. It is hard for language learners to learn language independently, especially for the ones who are used to total dependence on a teacher (Hurd, 2000). Consequently, the learners may find learning by this mode very difficult and are likely to drop out. This study will discuss how providing scaffolding can enhance self-efficacy when learners are engaged in distance learning.

Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy is the core concept of Albert Bandura's social cognitive theory. This concept can be defined as a person's belief concerning his or her completion of a task and his or her perceived competency level with performing the task (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy determines how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave. In the field of foreign

language learning, especially with writing skills, Mills, Pajares, and Herron (2007) pointed out that students' self- efficacy beliefs powerfully affect their academic performance in many ways. Students with high assurance in their capabilities willingly carry out challenging tasks, expend greater effort, show increasing persistence in the presence of difficulties, express lower anxiety levels, display their flexibility in the use of learning strategies, demonstrate accurate self- evaluation of their performance, and greater linguistic interest in scholastic matters, and self- regulate better than other students. As a result, the self-efficacious learners attain higher intellectual achievement. On the other hand, students with low self- efficacy choose to complete only easy academic tasks to which they apply little effort and limited persistence. For these reasons, self- efficacy beliefs are often said to be better predictors of academic success than are actual abilities (Bandura, 1997).

Students' self-efficacy is based on four main sources that impact the level of self-efficacy: past performance, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion, and emotional cues. These sources help students decide if they believe they have the ability to accomplish specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). Britner and Pajares (2006) studied sources of self-efficacy beliefs of middle school students and found that the first source, past performance, is the strongest source of self-efficacy. They recommended that teachers should scaffold learning activities by modifying them to students' developing skills. They also suggested that teachers scaffold student learning activities to build up the students' strong sense of self-efficacy.

The aim of this paper is to present distance language writing material as an instrument that can scaffold student learning and enhance self-efficacy.

Teaching Writing

Writing, which is considered an essential skill in foreign language education, has become an important tool for communication in the global community. In relation to the context of this study, essay writing is vital to Thai students because capability in essay writing will help them pass all of their English courses successfully. In addition, being proficient in essay writing in English will enable foreign language learners to be successful employees. Thus, teaching writing is a crucial aspect in foreign language teaching and learning.

An approach for teaching writing skills can be divided into two main categories; namely, a product approach and a process approach. A product approach is an approach that focuses on the final written work. The writing exercises used in this approach deal with sentence and paragraph-level writing. Students are always provided a framework that shows a pattern of writing; then, they are asked to add their ideas into this framework. Because the main focus of the approach is on written form, grammar is highlighted and an effort is made to avoid mistakes. Thus, the task in this approach allows the students to imitate, copy, and change the models provided by the teacher or course materials.

Another approach is a process approach. This approach is different from the product approach because it stresses creativity of the individual writer. It focuses on the development of good writing practice. Students are asked to go through writing processes and are allowed time to generate ideas, write drafts, and revise and edit their work. They are also taught writing devices used in marking the organization and in making the general coherence clearer. Like in the product approach, written text can be used as an example in the process approach, but for different purpose. It is used as a resource for more ideas.

Teaching writing must involve both process and product (Nunan,1999). The two approaches can be seen as useful because they have the same objective. They attempt to develop students' writing skills for producing a good piece of work, but the teaching approach is different. Support is needed in order to teach distance language writing using both the product and process approach.

Scaffolding

Scaffolding in an educational context is teaching techniques or tools that provide a supporting framework for student learning. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) defined it as a way for providing help or support to students based on their needs. The support is gradually removed as learner ability increases. Scaffolding is also theoretically described as a process in which students are given support until they can apply new skills and strategies independently (Rosenshine & Meister, 1992). The concept originates from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and his concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is the distance between what learners can do by themselves and the next level of learning that can be accomplished with competent assistance (Raymond, 2000). The scaffolding provides individualized support based on the learner's ZPD (Chang, Sung, & Chen, 2002). Thus, scaffolding helps learners accomplish tasks that they normally would not be able to accomplish on their own. Once the learners develop the necessary skills, the teacher can gradually remove the scaffolding. Therefore, the functions of scaffolding should be considered as the criteria for providing scaffolding in distance language learning.

To support students' learning, there are various types of scaffolding suggested by many educators. Wells (1993) classified scaffolding into macro and micro levels. The macro level or 'designed in' scaffolding (Sharpe, 2001) is related to large issues such as program goals and the selection and sequencing of tasks (Hammond & Gibbons, 2001) in order to help students progress step by step and mange their understanding systematically. The micro level occurs when the students interact with the teacher. The micro level is part of the macro level and both levels require the instructors to have a clear aim in providing them for learners. Sanguanpuak (2005) developed a set of self-access material for writing skills and used two levels of scaffolding (1) Macro-level by breaking the task down into steps; and (2) Micro-level by providing prompts, hints, modeling, examples, explanations, feedback, etc to assist the student to learn and practice writing. Therefore, this paper will adopt her framework to analyze the scaffolding provided in the distance learning mode because the context of distance learning is the same as self-access learning. In both contexts, the learners have to study without direct contact with the teacher. As this paper is focused on writing skills in distance learning mode, types of scaffolding to be investigated will be focused on those which are relevant to writing skills as follows.

1. Macro-level

It is a way to manage the writing task step-by-step by breaking the task down into steps. It is used for assisting students in managing their understanding systematically and to regulate task difficulty.

2. Micro-level

It refers to the provided scaffolding in each task, namely, explanation, giving examples, modeling, feedback, hints, and prompts.

Explanation

An explanation is a detail or reason that can be presented in various forms such as verbal, diagrammatic, and symbolic. This kind of support is used to enhance students' knowledge and increase their understanding.

Giving examples

An example is a type of scaffolding used to show or represent a subject matter to implement or enhance student's understanding. It could be a fact or event that shows a general rule.

Modeling

In a classroom setting, modeling is a demonstration that teachers show the learners how something is done in order to help the students to observe and follow the procedures taught. In a distance learning context, modeling can be used to yield desired performance. It is presented in the form of demonstrating the task that is to be completed. Although modeling is quite close to giving examples, it is different in that modeling will focus on process whereas examples focus on context.

Feedback

Feedback is a response provided to follow up on students' efforts or performance. It is used to help students deepen or enhance their understanding. Feedback could include an answer key or commentaries.

Hints

A hint is the guide provided to support students when they make mistakes or are having difficulties preventing them from continuing learning. Hints are provided in various forms such as key words, symbols, statements, and pictures. Hints are used to guide the students to finding the answers or solutions of the specific problem on their own.

Prompts

A prompt is a support used as a procedural facilitator that prepares or stimulates the students to start learning such as writing. It can appear in both written and verbal forms and helps the learners to go through the writing process.

Context of the Study

The study was carried out at a popular English language tutorial school in Thailand. The selected learning course was a writing course. The course used the Internet and a variety of web-based technologies to provide a distance language learning environment. The course is taught entirely online and provided for students who want to voluntarily learn writing outside of their regular school. The students had to manage their own learning in terms of time and place to study, and select the tasks they wanted do in order to complete the course within 6 months from June to December 2012. The main objective of the course was to instruct students to acquire proper writing skills and format to enhance effective communication.

Sentence structure, paragraph structure, essay format, and grammar and punctuation were reviewed in the course. There were 9 tasks and 2 tests to be completed, but the students had to make their own decisions when they were going to complete them. They could complete all the tasks or skip some tasks. To complete the tasks, students were assigned various types of essays to write using language functions.

In order to provide a distance learning writing course, the school sets a systematic and explicit learning environment for the students. In the learning environment, course content is delivered through pre-recorded streaming video lectures and traditional text books, including writing, vocabulary, and an example book. The course is divided into 17 lessons that serve as the organizing structure for the course. The course content consists of three main parts. The first part is "Developing a Sentence" where the students are taught grammar in three topics: sentence structure, sentence problems, and how to modify sentence. In part 2 "Developing a Paragraph", the students are taught paragraph writing in 4 topics: paragraph structure, unity, coherence, and supporting details. The last part is "Developing an Essay" aiming to teach students to write various types of essays and to break the process of writing into steps. The topics include essay plan, the introductory paragraph, body paragraph, and the concluding paragraph. Types of essay include process, classification, and argument. In addition, this part focuses on evaluation, namely, revising, editing.

To begin participating in the course, the students are required to visit the school only one time to register for the course, pay the tuition and fees, get the course materials, and their student ID card. In the learning environments, each lesson begins with an overview with the topic followed by exercises related to the content in the writing and vocabulary book. After the students learn the content and check their exercise correctness in the writing book by watching video especially in lesson 4, 8,10,11,12,13,14,15, and 16. They have to complete assignments individually by using good examples provided as the writing models. Then, they submit them online to the course instructors using "Writing Module program" to assess the correctness in the form of correction symbols and giving feedback. Communication between students and teachers was done via a discussion board. Here, the students post questions, issues and comments that will help them better understand the learning course and the topics.

Research Methodology

Subjects

The subjects for this study were learners who enrolled in the writing course. 114 students responded to the online survey on their self-efficacy to study at a distance learning course. Then, 30 volunteers were interviewed via telephone about their use of scaffolding provided in the course.

Instruments

Three instruments were used in this study: a questionnaire, a semi-structured phone interview and a document analysis of scaffolding used in the course. In order to assess levels of EFL learners' self-efficacy beliefs in distance language learning context, an online questionnaire was used. The subjects were asked to complete the questionnaire prior to participate in the course. The questionnaire included 17 items. Items 1-7 elicited students' English language writing self-efficacy, while items 8-17 dealt with the online learning self-efficacy of the subjects. The rating used was a Likert scale, with 4 representing very confident and 0 not at all confident. To obtain information on students' perception of the usefulness of scaffoldings

provided in the distance language writing materials, 30 students were voluntarily interviewed at the end of the course. The interview covered how the students used the provided scaffolding its usefulness and their satisfaction. Document analysis was conducted in order to identify types of scaffolding provided in the course.

Research Findings and Discussion

Learners' Level of Self-Efficacy: The results showed that although students' efficacy of distance learning was high ($\bar{x} = 2.47$), their level of writing self-efficacy was low ($\bar{x} = 2.05$). This result means that they have low self efficacy to accomplish language writing tasks in seven areas: (1) start writing an essay, (2) make an outline, (3) write a good introduction sentence on the assigned topic, (4) find ways to overcome problems if they get stuck while writing, (5) rewrite their confusing sentences, (6) rewrite first draft writing to make a better-organized essay, and (7) manage their time effectively to finish writing the essay on time. Therefore, writing self-efficacy is the area needing improvement in order for students to accomplish their tasks successfully.

Through analyzing documents provided both in print and online, it was revealed that there were six types of scaffolding in both macro and micro levels as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Scaffolding Provided in Distance Language Writing Course Materials

	Types of scaffolding	Material types				
		Printed materials			Online materials	
		Writing book	Vocabulary book	Example book	Course website	Pre-recorded streaming video
A	**Scaffolding at a task level (Macro-level)** Breaking the main task down into steps	Breaking the main task down into steps				Breaking the main task down into steps
B	**Scaffolding within task level (Micro level)**					
	Explanation	Diagrams Flow charts Mind maps				Verbal explanation
	Giving examples	Exercises	Exercises	Good writing examples		Exercises
	Modeling					Demonstration Good writing examples
	Feedback		Answer keys		Commentaries	Answer keys
	Hints	Tips and Tricks			Correction symbols	
	Prompts	Outline Writing frame			Outline Writing frame	Video clips Pictures

The subjects' perceptions of the scaffolding provided in distance language writing materials: The subjects' perceptions of the scaffolding provided in distance language writing materials were based on the data from document analysis and interviews. The data was presented according to types of scaffolding that were provided in the different types of materials and the usefulness of the scaffolding.

The data from the interview reveals that all of the subjects were satisfied with the provided support. When asked about the usefulness of scaffolding, they reported that every kind of scaffolding provided in the course materials was useful for them. The finding reveals that the most useful type was explanation, while the least useful type was prompt. The following section shows their reports on the benefit they got from the provided scaffolding.

Explanation

Explanations are found in the writing book in the form of diagram i.e. the structure of a paragraph and essay in comparison and video in the form of verbal explanation. Ten subjects (33.33%) perceived that explanation incorporated with examples helped them gain a better understanding because the supports were clear and were presented in Thai. As shown in the following extracts, they reported that an explanation helped them understand the process of writing and review their background knowledge concerning grammar and writing. It also helped them understand the assigned tasks clearly which enabled them to complete the tasks

"I thought explanation in writing book incorporated with examples could help me. After I followed the steps of providing explanation, I found that explanation was clear and useful for me to understand process of writing. It helped me to review my background knowledge about grammar and writing."
"I thought explanation of teacher A and B in video was useful for me. It was presented in Thai so it was easy to understand. It helped me to understand the content presented in the writing book and the tasks that the teachers assigned, so I could do the tasks correctly."

However, one subject mentioned that it would be better to use more Thai to present the explanation in the writing book as in the extract from interview below explains. She said:

"Explanation provided in the writing book was very useful for me to review my background knowledge about grammar points in which I can apply it to writing task. It would be more useful if some difficult words were explained more in Thai."

Therefore, explanation is an essential support of distance language learning materials and it should be clear and easy to understand by using L1. Thus, it can be said that explanation helped the subjects understand language, the content, and the assigned tasks. Consequently, the subjects had enough knowledge to perform the tasks on their own.

Giving examples

Examples were found in all printed material and video in two forms, exercises such as gap-filling and other student's good writing examples. Seven subjects (23.33%) indicated that the provided exercises and example essays were useful because they increased the subjects' understanding of the language, the concept of writing an essay, and the language used that they can imitate. They said:

"I thought the exercises provided in the materials, especially in the writing book made me clear about sentence types and clauses."

"Examples in the provided example book were very useful because I could see the structure of writing essays. I also use the language presented in the example in my writing"

Thus, it can be stated that giving examples can support students' comprehension and help them learn actively.

Modeling

Modeling in video was found in two forms: (1) the teacher demonstration such as how to generate ideas before writing and (2) other student's good writing examples. Four subjects (13.33%) reported that modeling in the form of demonstration and good examples helped them learn some new concepts, and also helped them to be confident in doing tasks. The following are extracts from the interview.

"After I had some background knowledge about how to generate the idea for writing an essay from explanation, I could understand how to do brainstorming. I thought teacher A in video demonstrated how to do it was useful for me."

"I thought that the teacher demonstration about how to write an introduction in the video was very useful because it could help me to prepare myself to write the introduction. The demonstration could increase my confidence to do my tasks, especially task three writing introductory paragraph."

It was also found that the examples encouraged the subject to analyze the essay structure. One subject reported that examples helped her believe that she could be successful in writing like the student in the video. She said:

"Watching a good example written by one student in video was useful for me because it made me understand the task. I thought if she could do it, I could do it as well because she studied at same level."

Modeling is a useful support for students when they want to learn new concepts. The students also observed the model until they had enough confidence. The extracts show that they can understand step of writing and the task.

Feedback

Feedback was found in the vocabulary book, the video, and course website in two main forms. The first form is answers keys of provided exercises and another form is the written commentary given by course instructors when they returned the assignments. They made evaluative judgments about students' work like "this essay addresses the topic adequately."Four students (13.33%) reported that feedback in the form of an answer key was useful for them because it helped them check explanations for correct answers as one student said.

"I watched video because I wanted to know the answers of the exercises provided in the writing book. I also wanted to know reasons of the answer, which were right and wrong. This kind of support helps me to review my background knowledge of grammar and writing."

However, just providing the correct answers would not be enough for learning a language at a distance as one subject said.

"I thought feedback should be given in the exercise of the vocabulary book because I wanted to know the reasons of my incorrect answer."

Therefore, feedback should be given in exercise informative manner so the students understand the reasons for their mistakes

Hints

Hints were found in the writing book and course website in two forms: (1) useful hints called Tips and Tricks, and (2) correction symbols given by the course instructors when they returned the assignments. Three subjects (10%) stated that hints or correction symbols in the form of feedback helped them check the correctness of their language. Hints assisted students when they made mistakes and guide them to correct their own work as one subject said.

"I thought that the most useful support for me was the correction symbols in writing module that the teacher used to identify my writing mistakes. It helped me to correct my work at home and read more grammar books."

It can be said that feedback given through hints can help students identify their mistakes. However, hints in this distance learning program are used only with local mistakes.

Prompts

Prompts are found in both printed and online material only in the first task in the form of a writing frame. The writing frame is a detailed structure of the paragraph with the provision of starting sentences of each paragraph. Two subjects (6.67%) indicated that prompts provided in the form of writing frame helped them to perform the first task on their own faster as presented in the extract from interview below.

"I thought that my first task was difficult for me. However, the structure of paragraph provided in the writing module and writing book helped me complete the task by myself faster."

Therefore, prompts are useful for the students' preparation in doing a task. Thus, the student may need the support at the initial stage in order to help them start doing their tasks by themselves in distance learning mode.

From the findings, it can be seen that the scaffolding provided in the online course helped the students go through the writing process. For some students, getting started is difficult. Providing prompts can help them learn the structure of the paragraph so they can complete the task by themselves. In this study, explanation was regarded as helpful because the students mentioned comprehension of writing concept and the importance in linking grammar and writing they are being taught with their background knowledge. In a distance learning context the students have no opportunities to interact with a tutor; therefore giving clear examples and modeling can help them perform the task successfully.

In productive skills like writing, feedback is important because it helps the students evaluate themselves. There are various kinds of feedback, normally positive or negative, implicit or explicit, corrective or non-corrective, immediate or delayed, specific or general, motivational or informational. The data showed that the students want informative feedback because it

helps them understand the process of writing. Giving feedback in the form of answers and explanations provides an important opportunity for learning in self-instructional materials (Dickinson, 1987). Therefore, the explanation about their mistakes should be provided for the students to enhance their understanding.

According to the findings, it is obvious that the students in the distance language learning course had low self-efficacy towards their writing before learning. The provided scaffoldings in the course helped the students believe they could do the tasks on their own in many ways. Firstly, explanation and giving examples made the content and assigned tasks clear to them. Then they knew what they had to do, so it means that they had learning goals. Secondly, modeling, especially in the form of good writing examples presented in videos built the student's belief in ability to do learning tasks. Modeling in videos showed the model students success in writing. It helped the student do the tasks by observing the models. She compared herself to the student, thus she believed she could be successful in writing like the student. Thirdly, prompts could help the student do the task beyond her independent efforts. Although the student perceived the first task to be difficult, the provided prompts assisted her in making an effort to learn and finish the task easily. Finally, feedback provided in the course could ensure students' belief in their abilities. The teacher feedback helped them see their errors and learn how to correct them by informative feedback when returning student work. In the course, feedback is another part of the learning process. The teacher gave the informative feedback in the form of hints or correction symbols, so it encouraged the students to notice the language form they were using. Therefore, after getting the supports or scaffoldings in the course, the students realized that they could do the task, and thus self-efficacy of writing increased.

Conclusion

This paper aims to present distance language writing material as an instrument that can scaffold student learning and enhance self-efficacy. The findings from the questionnaire indicated that the distance language learners had a low sense of writing self-efficacy, so they were not quite ready to accomplish writing tasks independently. However, the results from interviews suggest that it is valuable to scaffold the beginning distance language learners in area of writing self-efficacy. The provided scaffoldings in this study were useful because they helped students increase understanding in the writing process and deal with learning difficulties. Therefore, the scaffoldings helped students build their understanding and experience of learning topics, the subject, and providing successful experiences of mastering writing tasks. The learning experiences happened when the students reached the point where they understood the content knowledge enough to perform the task on their own or master the task. Consequently, mastery experience that is the most powerful source of self-efficacy made students confident in their own abilities to do other tasks successfully. Therefore, mastery experience effectively enhances students' self-efficacy in writing. Hopefully, this study's findings may be useful for educators interested in scaffolding student learning and enhancing self-efficacy in the distance language learning mode.

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Appendix

Level of learners' self-efficacy beliefs in English writing

	How confident are you in doing the following activities?	$\overline{X}$	Interpretation	Level of self-efficacy
1	Start writing an essay	1.96	Somewhat confident	Low
2	Make an outline for writing an essay	2.06	Somewhat confident	Low
3	Write a good introduction sentence on the assigned topic	1.98	Somewhat confident	Low
4	Find ways to overcome problems if you get stuck while writing	2.29	Somewhat confident	Low
5	Rewrite your confusing sentences	1.96	Somewhat confident	Low
6	Rewrite first draft writing to make a better-organized essay	2.00	Somewhat confident	Low
7	Manage your time effectively to finish writing essay on time	2.13	Somewhat confident	Low
		2.05	**Somewhat confident**	**Low**

Level of learners' self-efficacy beliefs in online learning

	How confident are you in doing the following activities?	$\overline{X}$	Interpretation	Level of self-efficacy
8	Remain motivated even though the instructor is not online at all times.	2.52	Confident	High
9	Concentrate on your learning even if there are many distractions (Facebook, Google+ , Twitter) around you.	2.19	Somewhat confident	Low
10	Plan your own online learning.	2.17	Somewhat confident	Low
11	Set goals for the online task you need to accomplish.	2.45	Confident	High
12	Achieve the online learning goals you set for yourself.	2.35	Somewhat confident	Low
13	Carry out challenging online learning tasks.	2.57	Confident	High
14	Evaluate your online learning.	2.35	Somewhat confident	Low
15	Continue until passing online learning course.	2.70	Confident	High
16	Access to Internet-connected computer equipment and software that meets the requirements for this course.	2.83	Confident	High
17	Read and comprehend materials required for online learning.	2.58	Confident	High
		2.47	**Confident**	**High**