

# “I HATE TUESDAYS!” THE SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS OF POSTGRADUATE LANGUAGE PRACTICE STUDENTS

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## ABSTRACT

The high drop-out and low throughput rates in higher education institutions is a matter of concern. Students must overcome many psychological barriers in the pursuit of an under- and postgraduate qualification. Self-efficacy is regarded as an under-researched psychological variable that may influence students' success in higher education institutions. Drawing on Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory, this study explores the self-efficacy beliefs of postgraduate Language Practice students. A qualitative research design was employed. Eleven narrative essays were completed and analysed by means of directive coding. Tuesdays were identified as the worst day of the week due to the module Research Methods and Techniques, that impacted negatively on the students' self-efficacy beliefs. Social engagement in the form of support groups is seen as an important role player in self-efficacy beliefs. Educators should consider students' various backgrounds when engaging with students, since this aspect proves to be an important factor in the development of self-efficacy beliefs. The findings may help navigate educators towards rendering the necessary emotional and social student support as a strategy to address the low success rate in universities.

**Keywords:** psychological barriers, self-efficacy beliefs, postgraduate journeys, higher education institutions.

## INTRODUCTION

Low success rates and therefore low throughput and high drop-out rates in South African universities are a cause for concern, and there is much debate about the topic locally and globally (Alexander 2016, 69; Maree 2015, 390; Pandor 2018, 1). South African higher education institutions accommodate more than one million students (Africa Check 2018, 1), which exceeds the ideal enrolment of 600,000 (Boughey 2017). A small percentage of students finish their qualifications within the allowed study period (Boughey 2017), with many failing or dropping out because of social and socio-economic challenges (Alexander 2016, 69; Pandor 2018, 1). These challenges range from loneliness (Modipane 2011, 1593) and language-related issues (Ralarah, Pinetah and Mchiza 2016, 233) to perceptions of staff as unhelpful, financial concerns and perceptions of racism (Maree 2015, 398). South African students, in particular,

are confronted with additional challenges such as poverty, parental abuse and neglect, a disadvantaged rural context, a lack of role models (Alexander 2016, 68), inequality, unemployment (Maree 2015, 391), crime, violence, drug abuse and gangsterism (Sylces and Gachago 2018, 85).

Of the many barriers that prevent students from furthering their studies, psychological barriers are least often addressed by educators (Goto and Martin 2009, 10). This is a matter of concern, as psychological variables may influence how students respond to other barriers. In addition, the pivotal role of psychological factors is emphasised by Van der Westhuizen (2013, 1325), who indicates that psychological well-being contributes to better academic performance. Amongst these psychological variables, self-efficacy is regarded by Alexander (2016, 69) as one of the most under-researched psychological factors that may impact on students' success at tertiary level. Academics working in educational settings should therefore pay more attention in researching the role of students' self-efficacy beliefs during their learning journeys. Self-efficacy refers to "the belief in one's capabilities to organise and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (Bandura 1997, 3). It is thus a person's belief in his/her abilities to succeed. In a higher education academic context, self-efficacy refers to judgements of people about their skills in designing and carrying out actions necessary for reaching educational achievements (Gökçek, Taşkin and Yıldız 2014, 1134; Schulze 2016, 286).

There is a host of research studies that examine the influence of students' self-efficacy on learning and motivation (Green, Morrissey and Conlon 2017; Lent, Brown and Hackett 2002; Linnenbrink and Pintrich 2003; Mbatha 2015; Schunk 2003; Wirawan and Bandu 2016). Self-efficacy beliefs are often measured in relation to a particular performance domain, such as academic achievement. There is evidence from several studies to support the effects that self-efficacy beliefs have on academic achievement (Brady-Amoon and Fuertes 2011; Carmichael and Taylor 2005; Chemers, Hu and Garcia 2001; Forester, Kahn and Hesson-McInnis 2004; Galyon et al. 2012; Hackett et al. 1992; Huerta et al. 2017; Lane, Lane and Kyprianou 2004; Lowinger et al. 2014; Maree 2015; Pajares 2003; Tiyuri et al. 2018). Although these studies have documented the relationship between self-efficacy, on the one hand, and academic achievement, motivation and learning on the other, they report mostly in the field of psychology, whereas many of these studies employed a Likert scale to obtain data and descriptive statistics for the data analysis. The students' own voices are not being heard.

Little is known about how students at universities experience their postgraduate journeys, specifically in relation to their self-efficacy beliefs. To address the void in scholarly literature, this study explores the self-efficacy beliefs of postgraduate Language Practice students at a South African university, from a phenomenological perspective. Such a study could contribute

to the knowledge base underpinning students' self-efficacy beliefs in South African higher education and help navigate educators towards rendering the necessary emotional and social student support as a strategy to address the low throughput and high drop-out rates in South African higher education institutions.

The article commences with an overview of the theoretical foundation with the focus on Social Cognitive Theory and self-efficacy. The research methodology section explains the nature of the phenomenological design employed in the study. The findings are then presented and discussed according to the four information sources that create students' self-efficacy. In the conclusion, the implications of the research for higher education theory and practice are argued and possible foci for further research identified.

## **THEORETICAL FOUNDATION OF THE STUDY**

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory informed this study, as it could contribute to a better understanding of self-efficacy as a psychological barrier. This theory is widely used in psychology, education and communication and is based on the Social Learning Theory, which was subsequently refined and renamed Social Cognitive Theory in 1986. Bandura avers that learning takes place in a social context with a dynamic interplay between an individual, the environment, and behaviour (Boston University School of Public Health 2016, 1). The first determinant (individual) indicates whether a person has high or low self-efficacy towards a particular behaviour. The second behavioural determinant reflects the response an individual receives after he or she performs a particular behaviour. Environmental factors, the third determinant, are environmental aspects that impact on the individual's ability to successfully complete a certain task (Chin and Mansori 2018, 56). The emphasis on social influence and social reinforcement is a unique feature of Social Cognitive Theory. Both these features are important in higher education contexts, since universities are places where students build social networks and make social contributions.

The purpose of this study was to explore the self-efficacy beliefs of postgraduate Language Practice students at a South African university. The four major information sources that create students' self-efficacy, as espoused by Bandura (1997, 195) guided the investigation. These are performance accomplishments, vicarious experience, verbal persuasion and physiological states.

Performance accomplishments are "extremely influential because it is based on personal mastery experiences", according to Bandura (1977, 195). Personal accomplishments are therefore effective ways to develop a strong sense of self-efficacy. Successes are being regarded as influential towards building strong self-efficacy beliefs, whilst failures contribute to a low

sense of self-efficacy (Van Dinther, Dochy and Segers 2011, 97).

Vicarious experience, which relies on inferences from social comparison, is a less dependable information source than personal accomplishments. However, when individuals witness other individuals successfully completing a task, it may contribute to self-efficacy belief (Van Dinther et al. 2011, 97). According to Bandura (1977, 197) people convince themselves that if other people can succeed, they should also be able to achieve at least some improvement in performance.

Verbal persuasion, such as encouragement and convincing others, may facilitate self-efficacy by helping people overcome self-doubt and rather focusing on the task at hand by giving their best effort (Bandura 1977, 198). Although positive verbal persuasion heightens self-efficacy, it is limited in creating a strong sense of self-efficacy (Schunk in Van Dinther et al. 2011, 98). Gielen, Peeters, Docy, Onghena and Struyven (2010, 313) claim that not all feedback may lead to an improvement in performance, and that it is still unclear how the different types of feedback impact students' self-efficacy.

Physiological states, which include emotional, physiological and psychological responses, may affect perceptions of self-efficacy in managing threatening situations (Bandura 1977, 198). According to Bandura (1977, 198), people rely on their physiological states in judging their vulnerability and anxiety to stress. These include physiological cues such as a racing heart, sweating, blushing and headaches. Van Dinther et al. (2011, 98) assert that feelings and symptoms such as stress reactions, anxiety, excitement and tension can be interpreted as indications of debility and failure.

Self-efficacy development could assist students in overcoming psychological barriers in their pursuit of a tertiary qualification (Bandura 1993; 1994). Under-developed self-efficacy expectations may impact negatively on a person's general, academic and career development (Bandura 1993; 1994). Given the high drop-out and low throughput rates of students in South African higher education institutions, it is imperative to explore students' self-efficacy beliefs in addressing the problem.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This study explores the self-efficacy beliefs of postgraduate Language Practice students at a South African university, from a phenomenological perspective. Students had to reflect upon their postgraduate journeys and write a narrative essay in which they report on their own experiences as a postgraduate Language Practice student. The essay assignment was handed to the students as part of their Language Dynamics IV module, and deemed important for the following reasons. Firstly, the Level Descriptor for a BTech qualification articulates that

students are expected to communicate their ideas in well-formed arguments, using appropriate academic discourse (The South African Qualifications Authority 2012, 12). Secondly, the essays would greatly contribute towards the researcher's understanding of these students' lived experience of a particular phenomenon (their postgraduate journeys). Lastly, the essays would reveal themes relating to self-efficacy as a psychological barrier. The next section outlines the research design and methodology.

## **Research design**

As qualitative research is based on phenomenology and takes into cognisance the examination of life or the world as encountered by human beings (Flick 2014, 302), qualitative data was collected to understand students' self-efficacy beliefs. According to Babbie (2011, 313) qualitative research can produce a richer understanding of social phenomena and is aimed at discovering how people construct meaning and understand their lived experiences. Since the students had to write narrative essays reflecting on their postgraduate. journeys, a qualitative mode of inquiry was deemed most appropriate. The study focused on the meaning of the narratives provided by the students, and strove to accurately shed light on how their stories are being told.

## **Sample**

The study employed a convenient sampling strategy to access information rich sources. The sample group consisted of eleven Language Practice students (the entire BTech group), all of whom were registered for the module Language Dynamics IV, which is a compulsory module in the BTech Language Practice programme offering. The sample reflected maximum variation and consisted of two Black males, five Black females, two Coloured males, one Coloured female, and one White female.

Informed consent was obtained from all participants to participate, while the researcher also assured them of anonymity and confidentiality of responses. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities.

## **Data collection method**

Narrative essays were used as data collection method. According to Joyce (2008, 1) narratives allow the researcher access to the participants' reality via their socially constructed essays. Pepper and Wildy (2009, 18) postulate that "descriptions of experience are given status when presented as narratives". The students had to give a full description in four A4 typed pages of their postgraduate journeys, including their thoughts, feelings, experiences, memories,

challenges, barriers, along with a description of the situation in which the experience occurred.

## Data analysis

Directive coding was used to analyse the data. With a directed approach, data analysis commences with a theory as guidance for initial codes (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1277). The themes that emerged are informed by Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) as espoused by Bandura (1986). The four sources (aspects) informing the students' self-efficacy beliefs during their postgraduate journeys guided the analysis and interpretation of the rich data in the narratives: performance accomplishments; vicarious experience; verbal persuasion and physiological states. These are discussed next.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Performance accomplishments (mastery experience)

Comments relating to performance accomplishments/mastery experience correspond well with Bandura's theory of self-efficacy (1977, 195). In this study, the students' accomplishments may have contributed towards the development of a strong sense of efficacy. Vincent reported to have published his first book, Palesa worked as a Supplementary Instructor, and Precious had launched an online magazine. These mastery experiences can be seen as influential towards self-efficacy development as noted in these examples:

"Publishing my first book was a childhood dream come true ... something that I have never thought I would be able to do." (Vincent)

"I grew and I am still growing this year. I launched an online magazine, practiced how to work with people and it is getting better every day." (Precious)

Theory that successes shape strong self-efficacy beliefs (Van Dinther et al. 2011, 97) are thus evident from the findings. The fact that all eleven students successfully completed their undergraduate qualification, and that they have met the academic requirements to proceed with their postgraduate journeys, motivated and inspired them for the year of further study. Matthew wrote,

"My friend and I made a vow to each other that 2017 was going to be our year to flourish; we were going to shine in class and pass all our modules with distinctions. In the first year we had seven modules, the second year six, and the third year five modules. I managed to obtain four distinctions in my undergraduate qualification, so passing *cum laude* in my postgraduate qualification was going to be a walk in the park."

The fact that the students set goals for themselves, articulates with the findings of Schulze (2016, 285) and Van Dinther et al. (2011, 105) who have claimed that goal setting may lead to a mastery experience. In this study students indicated that they have dreams and aspirations for a better education, career and financial stability. For example, two participants mentioned,

“By the age of 16 I already knew that I wanted to study until I obtain my Doctorate. I knew this dream of mine won’t be a walk in the park, but I was so determined, I was just ready to obtain my second qualification. I spent the holidays planning and preparing myself. I was scared and that motivated me.” (Vincent)

“I was very happy to see that my classmates also have a goal of obtaining a degree in Language Practice. Not only did I decide to study further to gain information ... but also to make more money in the work environment as well as to lead a better life with a lifetime of opportunities. Obtaining a degree will help me empower myself to be an agent in my own life. University education has empowered me in all kinds of ways to be more in control of my life’s logistics ... it continues to strengthen my knowledge and improve my life.” (Nia)

The students’ comments indicate how personal accomplishments, successes and goal setting can positively inform self-efficacy beliefs. By settings goals for themselves, students are able to measure their progress with an end goal in mind – their postgraduate qualifications. Academics in educational settings may want to create situations that provide successful experiences for students. One such example may be to break down a complex assignment into smaller, more specific components that challenge the students, but are still within their level of intellectual and mental ability.

### **Vicarious experience (social modelling)**

Vicarious experience or social modelling could also contribute to self-efficacy beliefs. This source of information mirrors Bandura’s (1977, 197) notion that people convince themselves that they can accomplish a specific task if they witness other people successfully completing the same task. The students found role models in their lecturers and other scholars, but also in each other. Two participants remarked,

“I always tell myself that one day I will be like them (scholars) and make meaningful contributions to my respective disciplines and become impactful to students. I was asking myself how these people do it, how do they produce such amazing work while there is so much pressure? The only answer I kept getting was that they wanted ‘this thing’, they committed themselves to it. If they could do it what would stop me from doing it too?” (Vincent)

“I have extraordinary respect for individuals with postgraduate qualifications ... They have done it, so can I.” (Karabo)

The fact that the entire class struggled with their postgraduate journeys brought some comfort in the sense that they were not alone and that they all felt the same way. Matthew and Bianca wrote,

"I thought to myself that, since my friend is a very positive person, maybe he would keep me calm with his preaching. He would perhaps give me an encouraging word that I can hold on to. I discovered that he had the same concerns as me. I asked some of my classmates how they experience their postgraduate journeys and one of them replied that she wishes she could turn back the hands of time and choose another course. As I listened to their murmurings, I began to feel more relieved because I wasn't the only one that the course was showing flames. My classmates dismay together ... my friends' poor grades comforted me. It made me feel so good knowing that I wasn't the only one falling apart." (Matthew)

"What gave me comfort was that I was not alone in my worries. My fellow classmates looked equally as scared and doubtful as I was." (Bianca)

The study produced an unexpected finding. Although social modelling can be seen as an information source contributing to a stronger sense of self-efficacy, it can also be seen as impacting negatively on self-efficacy belief. Zahara mentioned that she didn't like to be compared to other students.

"It is very difficult to perform when we are compared with the academic performance of previous students. Yes, I understand that the university needs to keep a standard of academic performance, but we cannot be pressured in maintaining it. We come from different backgrounds."

Lessons can be learned from the comments pertaining to social modelling. Students regard their lecturers as role models and educators should take cognisance of the fact that students look up to them. Academics should therefore act in ways that would contribute towards students' self-efficacy development. Students should not be compared to other students, since they come from different backgrounds.

### **Verbal/social persuasion**

Verbal persuasion, according to Bandura (1977, 198), may facilitate self-efficacy by convincing individuals that they have the skills and capabilities to succeed. In this study, students have indicated that they enjoyed some encouragement from their families, friends, and classmates. Tuli noted that her family and colleagues "were supportive" and "cheering" her up. "Good move Tuli," they said. "They asked me what am I going to tell my kids one day? That motivated and inspired me to never give up." Palesa also indicated that classmates did not only discuss studies but also other aspects of their lives.



Mark had expressed the need for a support group and started such a group to offer support to students who are not academically strong:

"I need someone to encourage me ... having a strong support structure is critical and it helps you to stay positive and maintain a bigger picture perspective."

Some of the participants found their lecturers' remarks as contributing towards their self-efficacy beliefs. Nia remarked that Dr Z made her aware that the only way to success in the course was to work consistently and ask for help if she needs it, while Dr A helped her to learn how to manage her time properly.

While some of the students experienced the verbal persuasion by their lecturers as positive encouragements, others were discouraged by the lecturers' remarks. Two of the participants mentioned,

"It felt like every one of my lecturers did not comprehend my discouragement. Each time I presented my work late they would yell at me." (Karabo)

"The lecturers keep saying we will meet again next year ... they keep pushing you down when you are already down." (Anna)

One participant had hoped to find some verbal encouragement from his mother. However, the lack of encouragement from his mother and friends motivated him even more to accomplish his goals. Interestingly enough, these remarks made him want to work even harder.

"She (my mother) just said I was going through a phase and that I'll be alright. When I tried to tell my friends what I go through as a student, they told me that I was overreacting and making a mountain of a molehill. Regardless how my mother and a few of my friends discouraged me, I became hell-bent and continued with my studies. I was now more determined than ever before." (Matthew)

These findings reveal the importance of verbal persuasion in the creation of self-efficacy beliefs. Not only do students rely on encouragement from their peers, family and friends, but also from their lecturers. Educators should therefore be mindful that their comments and feedback is instrumental in shaping self-efficacy beliefs.

### **Physiological and affected states**

Bandura (1977, 198) purports that physiological states influence perceptions of self-efficacy in handling threatening situations. The students described how the challenges of

the year had impacted on them physiologically and psychologically. Some of the students reported crying, sacrificing sleep or changing sleeping patterns, whilst others felt the effect of stress on their physical well-being. This is consistent with the findings of Morgan and De Bruin (2010, 182) regarding the burnout syndrome. Two participants stated,

"My two hours of sleep turned to 30 minutes if I was lucky. I was so focused on my studies I didn't even realise my body was suffering. I overworked myself so much that I was hospitalised for exhaustion. I suffered from pneumonia and stress to eczema and even anxiety. There were points whereby I would break down and cry during my Sunday jogs, because I do not have an idea of what to write about for a submission that would be due the following Tuesday. I really thought this course was going to kill me." (Vincent)

"I arrived on campus ... it felt like my heart was beating in my stomach. The fact that books were expensive and that I needed to buy it for class nearly made my heart stop." (Bianca)

The essays were characterised by mixed emotions, some of which students experienced simultaneously. Mark was simultaneously excited and terrified during his postgraduate studies, while Zahara used words such as "exciting", "shocking", "depressing", and "overwhelming" to describe her postgraduate journey. For Matthew the year was "scary", "exciting", "anxious", "depressing" and "overwhelming". In this regard Tuli also mentioned the words "anxious" and "depressing". Another emotion that manifested in some students' lives was "fear". However, in this study fear turns out to be a motivating factor. Nia mentioned that she was able to overcome her fears and learn from her mistakes.

The narratives revealed that there is a correlation between psychological well-being and academic achievement. One of the students stated that "having to hear almost every day how challenging a postgraduate qualification is, psychologically affects students' perception and that will subsequently lead to poor academic performance."

A recurrent theme in the narratives were the lack of proper time-management skills. Palesa, for example, mentioned that she is "very bad" at time-management. The fact that these students complained about their poor time-management skills, could serve as a directive for educators to guide students in managing their time more productively. Good time-management is important as it allows individuals to accomplish more in a shorter period of time. Given the heavy workload these students are confronted with, good time-management could lead to more free time, which allows students to take more advantage of learning opportunities and help them focus on what is important.

It is interesting to note that students have identified Tuesdays as the worst day of the week due to the module Research Methods and Techniques. This notion mirrors that of Van der Westhuizen (2013, 1324), who mentions that most students are not excited about the prospects

of completing a research methodology module during their academic journeys. Precious and Zahara elaborated,

"I hate Tuesdays. Every day and night I would pray for strength to get through Tuesday. It became so horrible that the whole day I would be emotionally unstable." (Precious)

"The first time my research proposal came back to me looking like a blood bath, it felt like death to my dreams. This module made a total idiot out of me. Why? Because I don't know what to do." (Zahara)

These comments reflect the students' anxiety and uncertainty about research methodology. The reason for their fear for research could be attributed to the fact that they only get acquainted with research methodology during the postgraduate year and not during the undergraduate qualification. Educators should therefore be mindful of the fact that students should be introduced to research and the different aspects relating to it earlier on in their academic careers. Becoming familiar with research methods allows students to understand it more effectively. This is especially important for human growth and development. Higher education institutions are places where students should be empowered to grow and reach their full potential.

Lastly, some students referred to a certain set of skills one should have in pursuing a postgraduate qualification. In this regard attributes such as dedication, self-discipline, self-motivation, optimism, enthusiasm, passion and persistence are deemed important.

The physiological states described above indicate that students experience physical and psychological barriers as well as emotional turmoil during their postgraduate studies, particularly in relation to workload and the module Research Methodology and Techniques. Some of the participants indicated that time-management could assist them in dealing with the heavy workload, whereas others mentioned the importance of persistence and self-discipline. These strategies seem to be valuable in assisting students with their postgraduate journeys.

## **CONCLUSION**

Students in higher education institutions face many challenges informing their psychological well-being during their under- and postgraduate studies. The questions thus arose: What can educators do to assist these students during their stay at university? What are their anxieties, fears and emotions, and what can we do to address these so that they can succeed academically? The aim of this study was to explore, through a phenomenological inquiry, the self-efficacy beliefs of postgraduate Language Practice students studying at a South African university, and thereby contributing to the knowledge base underpinning students' self-efficacy beliefs in humanities in the higher education landscape. The phenomenological inquiry enabled the

researcher to conduct deep analysis of the students' feelings, experiences and emotions. Their narratives provided insight into their self-efficacy beliefs, as well as those factors that contribute positively and negatively towards self-efficacy development.

The findings indicate that personal accomplishments, successes and goal setting contribute towards the development of self-efficacy. In addition, social engagement (not only in class activities, but also among each other) is seen as an important role player in self-efficacy beliefs. In this regard, a support group seems to be a valuable tool to foster discussions not only among students, but also between students and educators.

In previous research studies, students' attitude towards research development has been largely overlooked. The narratives in this study revealed that research had impacted negatively on the students' self-efficacy beliefs. In fact, Tuesdays were identified as the worst day of the week due to the module Research Methods and Techniques. The findings indicate that educators should consider exposing students to research earlier on in their academic journeys, and not only during postgraduate studies. This exposure would make the research module and the students' first encounter with the subject less intimidating. In doing so, skills that relate to the intellectual and behavioural aspects of research development would be enhanced. These findings suggest an opportunity for future research aimed at improving an understanding of issues that impact negatively on students' attitudes towards research.

The findings also indicate that, while it is important for lecturers to focus on the development of students' academic proficiencies, attention should also be focused on their own self-efficacy development as professional educators. To render the necessary emotional and social support in creating students' self-efficacy beliefs, it may be necessary for academics working in institutions of higher learning to take part in relevant interventions. Educators need to be aware of the impact that psychological barriers and challenges have on the self-efficacy of students, and should mediate them through these issues. Examples include, for instance, counselling, time-management, self-development and talent-management programmes to promote self-efficacy beliefs. It is also necessary for educators to consider students' various backgrounds, since this proves to be a key factor in the development of their self-efficacy beliefs. Verbal persuasion is equally important, and lecturers should demonstrate more empathy with students through their verbal feedback and remarks.

Although the sample size is small, it is appropriate for a qualitative study of this nature. The richness of descriptions captured in the data has contributed to a better understanding of self-efficacy beliefs of postgraduate Language Practice students at one particular South African university.

The insights into student self-efficacy through narratives could guide educators regarding

ways to improve education, and by doing so, in the long term contribute to improving the low success rates of students in South African higher education institutions. Who knows ... with the necessary social and emotional support from educators, Tuesdays might just turn into a great day!

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