

## **Student's Self-efficacy Beliefs and Their Reading Comprehension Performance: A Nigerian Perspective.**

### **Abstract**

This work investigated the influence of students' self-efficacy beliefs on their reading comprehension performance. One research question and one hypothesis each guided the study. The sample consisted of one thousand, two hundred and seventy-four (1,274) senior secondary three students (SS3) from public schools in Cross River State, Nigeria. Instruments for data collection were (IMTSV) and reading comprehension test (RCT). Data gathered were analyzed using independent t- test. The result revealed that students' self-efficacy beliefs did not significantly contribute to their reading comprehension performance, (t-value =.166). Based on this finding, the researchers suggested that factors other than the identified variable may have accounted for students' reading comprehension performance. They therefore recommended that in spite of the non-significant relationship between students' academic self-efficacy beliefs and reading comprehension performance, teachers and students need to participate actively in reading activities in order to facilitate reading comprehension and further promote students' reading comprehension achievement.

**KEYWORDS:** Academic self-efficacy beliefs, reading comprehension, performance, English language, students.

## **Introduction**

Reading is perhaps the most widely employed skill in the literate society. As Grigg and Mann (2008) point out, reading is an important tool for study, for creating awareness, for future employment and for recreation. This suggests that every student needs to master the ability to read and do this efficiently as reading provides access into every subject in the school curriculum as well as vocation. Reading is, thus, a tool with which every student can forge ahead in his other chosen profession. Reading largely determines the success of any educational endeavour as evident in Hermida's (2009) assertion that reading is probably the most important skill required by individuals in order to be successful in their studies. The author further observes that since students have to read lengthy assignments in different subjects with varying degrees of detail and difficulty, they need to read accurately. Failing to do this will probably result in inability to understand some of the information and ideas they read, ultimately leading to failure in academic work.

The primary goal of reading is comprehension, which according to Coiro (2008) is the process of simultaneously extracting and constructing meaning through interaction and involvement with written language. This will help the reader to get ideas, relate them to experience, organize ideas, as well as evaluate and utilize ideas. This implies that the reader must have some basic intellectual equipment in order to comprehend. He must possess intelligence, language, and experience. This is to say that only a small portion of the information needed to comprehend comes from the printed page, while the larger portion of the information is stored in the brain.

In other words, the seemingly easy process of reading to learn is essentially psycholinguistic. It involves the interaction of language, thought and cognition. It also entails complex information processing, language comprehension or receptive communication behaviour. All of these serve as stimulants to intellectual development, which makes reading functional in our insatiable quest for knowledge and wisdom. Greene (2001) sees comprehension in relation to a reader's ability to follow the pattern of thinking intended and structured by the author's discourse. In this wise, comprehension is rooted in and synonymous with intelligence; the ability to make a thorough, logical analysis of conceptual or cognitive relationships. This means that to comprehend one must think about what one has read.

If a learner fails to master the skills of reading, the rest of his academic career becomes either a flat failure or only a limping success. This also limits the learner's ability to meet today's high learning standards as he becomes unable to cope with textbooks provided for studies. These limitations manifest in failures in examinations. Learners thus need to be efficacious in the reading tasks in order to cope with academic work and out of school demands later in life.

## **Theoretical Perspective and Concept of self-efficacy beliefs**

For Bandura (1986), the capability that is most 'distinctly human' is that of self-reflection, hence it is a prominent feature of social cognitive theory. Through self-reflection according to Bandura (1986), people make sense of their experiences, explore their own cognitions and self-beliefs, engage in self-evaluation, and alter their thinking and behavior accordingly. He therefore propounded that of all the thoughts that affect human functioning and stand at the very core of social cognitive theory, are self-efficacy beliefs; i.e. people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances. Self-efficacy beliefs, according to Bandura, provide the foundation for human

motivation, well-being and personal accomplishment. This implies that unless people believe that their actions can produce the outcome they desire, they have little incentive to act or to persevere in the face of difficulties.

So, Bandura's (1997: 24) key contentions as regards the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human functioning is that "people's level of motivation, affective state, and action are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively true". For this reason, how people behave can often be better predicted by the beliefs they hold about their capabilities than by what they are actually capable of accomplishing, for the self-efficacy perceptions held determine what individuals do with the knowledge and skills they have.

This explains why people's behaviours are sometimes disjoined from their actual capabilities and why their behaviour may differ widely even when they have similar knowledge and skills. For instance, many talented individuals suffer frequent and sometimes debilitating bouts of self-doubt about capabilities they clearly possess, just as many individuals are confident about what they can accomplish despite possessing a modest repertoire of skills. Implicitly, students who are confident in their academic skills expect high marks on examinations and expect the quality of their work to reap personal and professional benefits. The opposite is true of those who lack confidence. This could be the reason why students who lack confidence in their academic skills envision a low grade even before they begin an examination or enroll in a course. It is against this background that the researchers sought to establish the perceived influence of students' academic self-efficacy beliefs on their reading comprehension performance. Beliefs influence the types of goals people set, which can influence their reading behaviours. Schunk (2000) opines that higher self-efficacy and interest are related to the use of more active cognitive strategies (e.g. Elaboration, paraphrasing) and willingness to develop skill proficiency.

Self-efficacy therefore, according to Pajares (1996) is a person's confidence to perform a specific task successfully and is linked closely to initial task engagement, persistence, and achievement. Bandura (1997) refers to self-efficacy as one's convictions to successfully execute a course of action required to obtain a desired outcome.

In academic settings, Niemivirta and Tapola (2007), citing Vatham and Locke (1991), opine that self-efficacy has bearing on both the level and type of goals people decide to strive for. It therefore follows that as Schunk (1991) points out, students' self-efficacy beliefs consist of their belief to perform given academic tasks at designated levels. And the perceived academic self-efficacy as defined by Bandura is a personal judgment of one's capacity to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performance. Hence, Bandura (1993) avers that students' belief in their efficacy to regulate their own learning and to master academic activities determines their aspirations, level of motivation and academic accomplishment. No wonder, Pajares and Miller (1994) support the view that students with strong sense of self-efficacy willingly engage in challenging tasks, invest greater effort and persistence and show superior academic performance than those who lack confidence. This view is evidenced in Pajares and Miller's (1994) studies which reveal that when a student's self-concept, or belief about ability, is presented on an efficacy scale, efficacy measures, unlike self-concept, tend to predict outcomes.

Bandura (1997) agrees that increased self-efficacy is accompanied by enhanced intrinsic motivation, the ability to sustain high levels of motivation and achievement oriented behaviour, persistence in the face of difficulties and better problem solving. Moreover, the author asserts that perceived self-efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual performance than skill alone. Perhaps, this made Bandura (1997) to reiterate that students with greater efficacy are more likely

to select challenging tasks, expend more effort, and persist when encountering difficulties. This presupposes that high efficacy is an important factor in helping students to engage in and persist at difficulty tasks, such as reading for understanding.

For instance, while numerous studies, as indicated above, reveal that efficacy beliefs are influenced by the acquisition of cognitive skills, Bandura (1997) argues that the cognitive skills are not solely the reflection of efficacy beliefs. Highlighting further, the author points out that studies have shown that children with the same level of cognitive skills differ in their intellectual performances depending on the strength of their perceived self-efficacy. Thus, Bandura (1997) says that perceived self-efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual performance than skill alone. This view is confirmed that of Mutton and Lents (1991) that high academic self-efficacy is a very strong predictor of academic achievement.

Similarly, Schunk (2000) avers that individuals with high efficacy beliefs about their ability to successfully complete given tasks will generally perform well on these tasks while others with lower efficacy beliefs for specific tasks tend to become idle or give up when faced with these tasks. This indicates that the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience. However, Choi (2005) has a contrary view as the result of a study he conducted revealed that neither general self-efficacy nor academic self-efficacy was a significant predictor of students' term grades.

To highlight the significance of self-efficacy in academic performance, Bong (1999) investigated the relative contribution of self-efficacy beliefs in predicting college students' course achievement and future course enrollment intentions. The subjects used for the study were 168 undergraduate students from a women university in Korea. Findings revealed self-efficacy perceptions projecting as a strong predictor of academic performance. This result re-emphasizes Bandura's (1997) stance that perceived self-efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual performance. In his submission Bouffard-Bauchard (1990) conducted a study to determine whether activating conditional knowledge about appropriate strategies for studying a text would enhance self-efficacy and comprehension monitoring. Seventy-six college students were assigned to one of two conditions, with inference ability across conditions. In the activation condition, subjects were given the opportunities to reflect on the importance of taking into account time constraints, relevant features of the task, and nature of subsequent comprehension tests, when selecting appropriate study strategies. Subjects in the control condition were not given the opportunity to reflect on their knowledge before processing the text.

The results indicated that subjects in the activation condition outperformed those in the control condition on reading comprehension monitoring and on performance on the comprehension test, but not on self-efficacy. Yet self-efficacy was related to comprehension performance in the control group, but was not in the activation group. This result suggests that a procedure which focuses subjects' attention on their own conditional strategic repertoire before they proceed with a task is self-efficacy. This also demonstrates the critical role self-efficacy perception plays in determining one's achievement-related cognition effect and action.

In a similar situation, Chen, Casper and Cortina (2001) conducted a study which examined meta-analytically whether self-efficacy mediates the cognitive ability-performance and conscientiousness-performance relationship, and whether task complexity moderates the extent to which self-efficacy mediates these relationships. Results indicated that cognitive ability and conscientiousness positively related to self-efficacy, but that the magnitude of these relationships varied with task complexity. In addition, result revealed that self-efficacy mediated the relationship of cognitive ability and conscientiousness with performance on simple tasks, but

notion complex tasks. This presupposes that efficacy beliefs are influenced by the acquisitions of cognitive ability on simple task alone in relation to these findings.

Bong (2004) assessed academic self-efficacy performance-approach and performance avoidance achievement goal orientations in reference to English and general school learning. The participants used for the study were 389 Korea high school girls. The result showed that academic self-efficacy beliefs were correlated moderately, whereas performance – approach and performance avoidance achievement–goal orientations demonstrated strong correlation across different contents.

In yet another study, Artino and Stephens' (2006) investigated a study to determine if students' self-efficacy was associated with their self-reported use of cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies in online courses. The subjects used for the study were 32 graduate and 64 undergraduate students from a large public university in Northeastern United States. Findings showed that self-efficacy was positively related to students' reported use of elaboration, critical thinking and metacognitive self-regulation. This is a proposition that students who believed they were capable of learning were more likely to report use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies. This is an indication that the higher the sense of efficacy, the greater the effort, persistence, and resilience as opined Bandura (2001).

In consonance with the above view, Barkley (2006) conducted a study to investigate whether relations existed between sixth, seventh, and eight grade learners and whether student perceived efficacy beliefs were predictors of reading comprehension achievement as measured by a comprehension subtest score on a state standardized test. The subjects were 400 sixth, seventh and eighth grade students enrolled in middle school.

Results indicated that when grades six, seven and eight were combined, students' efficacy beliefs were found to positively correlate with reading comprehension. This is in line with Bandura's earlier assertion that efficacy beliefs are powerful predictors of performance.

Wolters and Rosenthal (2000) investigated the relations between a set of pre-decisional beliefs including students' task values, self-efficacy and learning and performance goal orientations and five post-decisional, implementation strategies students used to regulate their effort and persistence for academic tasks assigned for a specific class. A group of eight grade students (N=114) completed a self-report survey that assessed these four motivational beliefs. They used five motivational regulation strategies, including self-equating, environmental control, interest enhancement, master and performance self-talk. Results indicated that self-efficacy was not related significantly to any of the five regulatory strategies. This result is contrary to Bandura's (1997) assertion that perceived self-efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual performance than skill alone. There is need, however, to empirically establish the influence of self-efficacy skills on reading comprehension performance among students in the Central Senatorial area of Cross River State, Nigeria.

## **Research Question**

In view of the study purpose it becomes pertinent to ask; do students perceive their academic self-efficacy beliefs as exerting some influence on their reading comprehension performance?

## **Hypothesis**

In line with the research question it was hypothesized that students' academic self – efficacy beliefs have no significant influence on their reading comprehension performance.

## Research Method

The study adopted Ex-post Facto research design, which is a systematic empirical inquiry in which the researcher has no control over the independent variables (Kerlinger & Lee 2000), as their manifestation had already occurred.

The sample consisted of 1,274 Senior Secondary III students, made up of 625 males and 649 females, and drawn from a population of 11,350 students from the study area. Two research instruments, the first a questionnaire for measuring teachers' and students' variables (IMTSV), and the second a Reading comprehension Test (RCT) for students, were used to obtain relevant data from the subjects.

## Result of Hypothesis Testing

Data gathered were analysed using independent t-test and the result is as presented on Table 1 below:

**TABLE1: Independent t-test comparison of students' academic self-efficacy beliefs and reading comprehension performance**

Levels of self- Efficacy beliefs	N	X	SD	T	P-level
Low	665	50.42	15.36	.166ns	.868
High	609	50.27	15.76		
<b>*Not significant at 0.05 level, critical t-1.960</b>					

The result in Table1 above shows that the independent t-test analysis of the reading comprehension performance differences on the basis of levels of self-efficacy beliefs produced at-value of .166. This t-value is lesser than the critical t-value of 1.960 at .05 confidence level with 1272 degrees of freedom. The result shows that students' academic self-efficacy belief does not significantly influence their reading comprehension performance.

This finding is in contrast to earlier works of Schunk (1991), Bandura (1993) Pajares and Miller (1994), and Bandura (1997). These authors' separate studies showed that perceived self-efficacy is a better predictor of intellectual performance than skill alone. This present finding is also at variance with the earlier findings by indicating a negative effect of students' academic self-efficacy beliefs and their reading comprehension performance. However, this finding supports that of Wolters and Rosenthal (2000), who in their earlier study equally found that self-efficacy was not related significantly to performance. Similarly, Choi (2005) found neither general self-efficacy nor academic self-efficacy a significant predictor of student's term grades.

A possible explanation of this finding could be derived from students' characteristics. Students are often not interested in school work. As a result they are, on the average, not

determined to persevere in hard work in order to achieve; otherwise they would devise all strategies to read elaborately, think critically, and adopt various strategies to break through difficult tasks. This was not the case with the students used in this study. Another possible explanation of the variation in findings could be attributed to the different locations where the researches were conducted. Earlier researches were foreign-based, while the present one was based in Nigeria, which has a different cultural background. It implies that factors other than the variable in focus may have contributed to the variance in findings.

### **Summary and Concluding Remarks**

Irrespective of the finding of this study, the researchers believe that there is need to develop the academic self-efficacy belief of students since other studies have found it relevant to performance. Moreover, human beings are dynamic, and under certain conditions one may find that self-efficacy beliefs will become significant. To help students in this direction, teachers, particularly those of English language will need to improve on their knowledge of subject matter. They can then transfer the relevant skills to the learners. This would boost the confidence of learners and enhance their performance capacity. There is also need to include recreational reading in school time-table in order to assist the readers in satisfying their yearnings for success.

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