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The Relationship between General English Achievement of Iranian EFL Learners and Their Self-Efficacy at Different Proficiency Levels

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ABSTRACT

Among affective variables self efficacy is recognized to have an essential role in academic success. Many studies have examined the function of self efficacy in academic achievement, though as Pajares (2000) mentioned the relation of language achievement and self -efficacy has not been studied well and there has been small research in this regard. This made the researcher to investigate the relationship between English achievements of Iranian students and their self-efficacy. 60 students from Marefat Institute in Babol and Iran National Institute in Amol were chosen for the sample of present study. In order to measure students' language proficiency an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered. To measure the level of self-efficacy in participants, a self-efficacy questionnaire was used which was an adaptation of Bandura's questionnaire including 25 items with subsequent 5-point Likert-scale response choices. The result of study were analyzed through Pearson Correlation and showed a positive relation between self efficacy and Iranian students' language proficiency.

KEYWORDS: Self-efficacy**;** Language Proficiency**;** Academic Self-efficacy; General Self-efficacy; Academic Achievement

INTRODUCTION

It is apparent that learners' affective variables have a key role in students' success. Some scholars believed affective variables have influenced success or failure of foreign language learning even more than aptitude (Chastain, 1988). Among affective variables self efficacy is recognized to have an essential role in academic success of students. Bandura (1993, p.136) argues that efficacy beliefs affect the way people feel, think and behave. "In social cognitive theory, people must develop skills in regulating the motivational, affective, and social determinants of their intellectual functioning as well as the cognitive aspects". Pajares (2000) believed self efficacy is a marvelous predictor of individual behavior and functioning.

Bandura (1977, p.174) defines self-efficacy as “people’s judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performance”. Bandura (1977) focused on self-efficacy, the notion that one can produce the behaviors necessary to cause a given outcome. Self-efficacy influences what individuals choose to do; their level of effort and persistence in the face of difficulties; and subsequent performance. It is a dynamic, multifaceted belief system that varies across situations and activities.

Bandura (1986) argues that self-efficacy is a general belief in one’s ability to successfully handle or control important events in life. Spratt, Humphreys and Chan (2002) state that self-efficacy is a motivational construct which predisposes learners to autonomous behavior. It refers to an individual’s beliefs that he/she has the capacity to reach a certain level of performance and achievement. Cotteral (1999) focuses on ‘self-efficacy’ which involves the learners’ confidence in their overall ability to achieve more specific language goals. She also emphasizes that teachers should support individual learners who need to develop their sense of self- efficacy before they engage in learning tasks which will be crucial to their language learning experience.

Wong (2005) argues that in the area of acquisition, researchers have found that many students learning ESL have a low sense of self-efficacy and a lack of learning strategies to help them gain proficiency in the language. These factors decrease their motivation to learn and their performance in English academic tasks. Low self-efficacy hinders their participation in learning activities. In fact, as Zimmerman & Cleary (2006 as cited in Jing, 2006) claims those who are more self-efficacious are able to effectively manage and cope with circumstances that are expected to have a higher probability of succeeding, even if others have the same inherent ability or skill level. Students’ self-efficacy beliefs contribute to academic performance over and above the effects of their ability.

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According to Bandura (1977), academic self-efficacy is defined as personal judgments of one's capabilities to organize and execute courses of action to attain designated types of educational performance. Academic self-efficacy predicts academic performance. In other words, there is a reciprocal relationship between self-efficacy and academic success. Dewitz and Walsh (2002) state that self- efficacy beliefs are significantly related to choice and performance in the realm of academic behavior. There is a positive relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and individual's performance, persistence, and outcome expectations. It is associated with college students' satisfaction. Individuals reporting higher self- efficacy tend to be more satisfied with college life. Students scoring higher measures of self-efficacy are likely to report higher satisfaction. Individuals with stronger self-efficacy beliefs in specific areas often perform better and have higher expectations in those areas. Pajares (2002) states that academic self-efficacy influences cognitive strategy use and self-regulation through the use of metacognitive strategies.

Schunk (2000) states that academic self-efficacy can be defined as individual's confidence in their ability to successfully perform academic tasks at a designed level. Jing (2006) states that self-efficacy in language learning can be perceived as how learners perceive their ability as language learners and their progress in relation to the particular context in which they are learning. Academic self-efficacy is related to issues, such as self-efficacy expectations; perceived self-competence; perceived control; academic self-regulatory skills like goal-setting, self-evaluation, self-monitoring, time planning and management, and strategy**.**

Self-efficacy has been used in research in different social, political and academic settings. Rahemi did a study in 2007; the researcher examined English self-efficacy and EFL achievements among students with low proficiency levels majoring in humanities at the senior high school. The study included a structured questionnaire and a measure of EFL achievements and an interview with the English teachers. The analysis of the result showed that students of humanities had no tendency toward English and did not enjoy positive English self-efficacy. Besides, EFL achievements were greatly affected by English self-efficacy. Rahimi and Abedini (2009) surveyed the role of their listening test performance. The results of statistical analysis indicated that listening comprehension self-efficacy was significantly related to listening proficiency. Self-efficacy has been used in research in different social, political and academic settings. However as Pajares(2000) Concerned there are few researches in the relation of second language achievement and self- efficacy. The current study intended to study the relation between general English achievement of Iranian EFL learners and their self-efficacy at different proficiency levels.

The research questions posed at this study are as what follows:

Q1: Is there any relationship between general English achievement of Iranian low EFL learners and their self-efficacy.?

Q2:Is there any relationship between general English achievement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners and their self-efficacy.?

Q3: Is there any relationship between general English achievement of Iranian advanced EFL learners and their self - efficacy?

To comply with the objectives the following null-hypothesis were formulated:

HO1: There is no relationship between general English achievement of Iranian low EFL learners and their self-efficacy.

Ho2: There is no relationship between general English achievement of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners and their self-efficacy.

Ho3: There is no relationship between general English achievement of Iranian advanced EFL learners and their self-efficacy.

BACKGROUND

Bernhard (1997) defines the concept of "self-efficacy" as learners' beliefs about their abilities to accomplish a task. For Pajares (2000), it is the students' judgments of their academic competence. The concept is also defined by Ehrman (1996) as the degree to which the student thinks he or she has the capacity to cope with the learning challenge (Cited in Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 16). If people have high positive self-efficacy about learning a second language, then they believe that they have the power and abilities to reach this goal. On the other hand, people with low self-efficacy feel that they do not have the power and abilities to learn a language, thus admitting failure from the start (Bernhardt, 1997). Nearly two decades of research revealed that self beliefs are strong predictors of academic achievements so that a new wave of educational psychologists are calling for attention to self-beliefs related to their academic pursuits (Pajasres, 2000). Of all beliefs, self-efficacy is the most influential arbiter in human agency and plays powerful role in determining the choices people make, the effort they will persevere in the face of challenge, and the degree of anxiety or confidence they will bring to the task at hand (Bandura, 1986, p. 397). It is this perceived self-efficacy that helps explain why people's behaviors differ widely even when they have similar knowledge and skills.

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The concept of self-efficacy is recognized by Oxford and Shearin (1994, p.21) as "a broadened view of expectancy which is drawn from social cognition theory". They define the term as "one's judgment of how well one can execute courses of action required to deal with prospective situations" (ibid). According to Bandura (1977), self-efficacy refers to "an individual's judgment about his or her ability to accomplish a given task or activity." (Cited in Choi et al. 2001, p. 1). For him, self-efficacy is a much more consistent predictor of behavior than any of the other closely related variables. This view is supported by Graham and Weiner (1995) (Cited in Pajares, 2000) who observed that the acquisition of new skills and the performance of previously learned skills have been related to efficacy beliefs at a level not found in any of the other expectancy constructs.

According to Pajares (2000), beliefs that individuals create and develop and hold to be true are vital forces in their success or failure in school. This would lead one to infer that research on achievement, on why students achieve or fail to achieve, and on why they do things they do in school should naturally focus, at least in great part, on students' self-efficacy beliefs. According to Bandura (1986, p. 394), self-beliefs affect behavior in four ways. First, they influence choice of behavior. He proposed that "our assessment of our own capabilities is basically responsible for the outcomes we expect and for the knowledge and skills we seek and require. Hence, self-efficacy is a more powerful determiner of the choices that individuals make". Second, self-beliefs help determine how much effort people will expend on an activity and how long they will persevere. Low self-efficacy in a student, for example, creates a self-doubt that may keep him away from trying. So, higher sense of efficacy results in a greater effort, expenditure, and persistence. The third way that self-beliefs influence human agency is by affecting an individual's thought patterns and emotional reactions. People with low efficacy, for example, may think that things are tougher than they really are. This belief may foster stress and may make them attribute failure in difficult tasks to deficient ability rather than to insufficient efforts. The last way self-beliefs influence behavior is by recognizing humans as producers rather than simply foretellers of behavior.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

PARTICIPANTS

The subjects participating in this study were 100 Iranian EFI learners from Marefat English Institute in Babol, and Iran National Institute in Amol. All of the participants were female and their first language was Persian. They aged between 13 and 28.

An OPT test was administered to homogenize the research population. On the basis of the results of the OPT, the subjects were divided to three proficiency levels: low, intermediate and advanced. At the end a total of 60 people (20 people at each level) are randomly selected as the sample of the study.

Learners at low level aged between 13 and 15 and they had studied English for about 3 years. The intermediate learners aged between 15 and 21 and they had studied English for about 4 to 5 years. The advanced learners aged between 19 and 28 and they had studied English for about 6 years.

MATERIALS

In order to test the hypotheses, two types of materials were used in this study. The first one was a self- efficacy questionnaire (A standardized Persian questionnaire consisting of 25 items with corresponding 5-point Likert scale response options). The second material was the OPT (Oxford Placement Test). These two materials will be explained in detail.

THE SELF-EFFICACY QUESTIONNAIRE

The self-efficacy questionnaire comprised 25 items with corresponding 5-point Likert-scale response options. This questionnaire was an adaptation of a survey created by Albert Bandura, who is an authority in self-efficacy (Maddux, 1995; Schunk, 1995, 1996, cited in Gahungu, 2007). A certain behavior was stated and followed by 5 numbers, each one corresponding to the extent to which the respondent believed the statement applied to him or her. An example is "I know I can read a text in English and answer questions about specific information," followed by 0 (corresponding to never) 5 (corresponding to always). The participants were asked to circle one number that best represented the degree to which the corresponding statement applied to them.

OXFORD PLACEMENT TEST

In this study, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) , version 1,1, was administered among 100 Iranian EFI learners from Marefat English Institute in Babol, and Iran National Institute in Amol.. OPT comprised 60 questions including fill in the blank, cloze test and multiple-choice questions, each question had 1 point, totally 60 points. It took 75 minutes to administer the test. Prior to the administration, the OPT was piloted on 32 freshmen students studying English for the general purposes at the private English language institution. According to the result obtained, their language level and the test suitability was confirmed. Calculating the mean and the variance of the test scores on OPT, KR-21 formula, the most practical, frequently used method of estimating reliability, was utilized

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in this study. Having the mean (X=61) and the standard deviation (S.D. =7.87) of the scores on OPT, the reliability of the test were obtained to be 0.81 respectively.

PROCEDURES

In this section, the procedure for administering is addressed in detail. The participants took part in this study during their regularly scheduled class period. In order to test the hypotheses the subjects were asked to respond the self-efficacy questionnaire in 15 minutes. Before the administration of questionnaire, the students were given a brief oral overview of the research project, the purpose of the study, and brief explanation or definition of the variable (self-efficacy) by the researcher herself. A standardized Persian questionnaire consisting of 25 items with corresponding 5-point Likert scale response options was used in this study. Self-efficacy score is a continuum which ranges from 0-125. This questionnaire is an adaptation of a survey created by Albert Bandura, who is an authority in self-efficacy (Schunk, 2000). A certain behavior was stated and followed by 5 numbers each one corresponding to the extent to which the respondent believed the statement applied to him or her. An example, "After reading a text in English, I'm sure I can retell it in English" followed by 0 (corresponding to Never)5 (corresponding to Always).

The participants were asked to circle one number that best represents the degree to which the corresponding statement applied to them. The object of this questionnaire was to find the probable relationship between the score obtained in students' questionnaire and their OPT test. In other words, this study was an attempt to seek whether those students with high self-efficacy perform better in their OPT test. In order to measure the students' language proficiency, an OPT, version 1,1, was administered. OPT comprised 60 questions including fill in the blank, cloze test and multiple choice questions, each question had 1 point, totally 60 points. It took 75 minutes to administer the test. The scores gathered through these two devices were calculated and analyzed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The table of In order to examine the relationship between EFL learners' self efficacy and students' level of language proficiency the Pearson-product moment formula was conducted. The results are presented in the following table.

Table 1. *Pearson Correlation of OPT and self-efficacy*

		OPT	**Self-efficacy**
OPT	Pearson Correlation	1	.766**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	60	60
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.766**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	60	60

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As indicated in table 4.1 the relationship between OPT and self-efficacy was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Table 1 indicates a strong positive correlation between OPT and self-efficacy (r=.76, n=60. p< .05). Preliminary analysis was performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, and homoscedasticity. Table 4.2 indicates the results of Shapiro-Wilk and Kolmogrove-sminove indicating above the p value. This means that test distribution is normal.

Table 2. *Tests of Normality for OPT and self-efficacy*

	Kolmogorov-Smirnova			**Shapiro-Wilk**		
	Statistic	**df**	**Sig.**	**Statistic**	**df**	**Sig.**
OPT	.110	60	.070	.964	60	.075
Selfefficacy	.106	60	.091	.975	60	.263

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

The following figures present normal plot for both OPT and self-efficacy.

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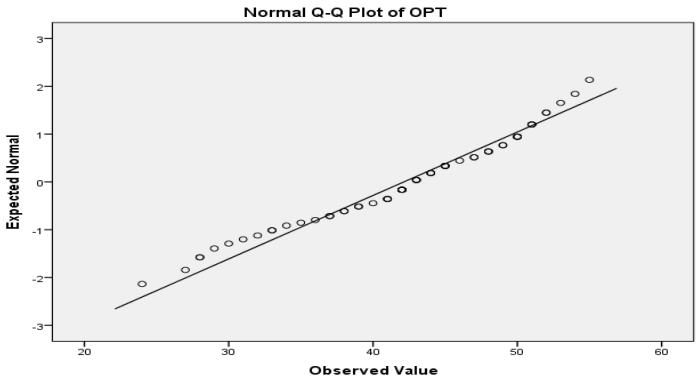

Figure 1. Normal plot for OPT

Figure 2. Normal plot for Self-efficacy

Testing the First research question

In order to test the first null-hypothesis suggesting that there is no relationship between general English achievement of Iranian low EFL learners and their self-efficacy, the Pearson-product moment formula was conducted. The results are presented in the table 3.

Table 3. *Correlations between OPT of low EFL learners and their self-efficacy*

		OPT beginner	**Self-efficacy**
OPT beginner	Pearson Correlation	1	.804**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.804**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 3 indicates a strong positive correlation between OPT and self-efficacy (r=.80, n=20. p< .05). Therefore, the first null hypothesis is safely rejected. In other words, there is a relationship between general English achievement of Iranian beginner EFL learners and their self-efficacy. Figure 3 indicates the scatter plot of both variables.

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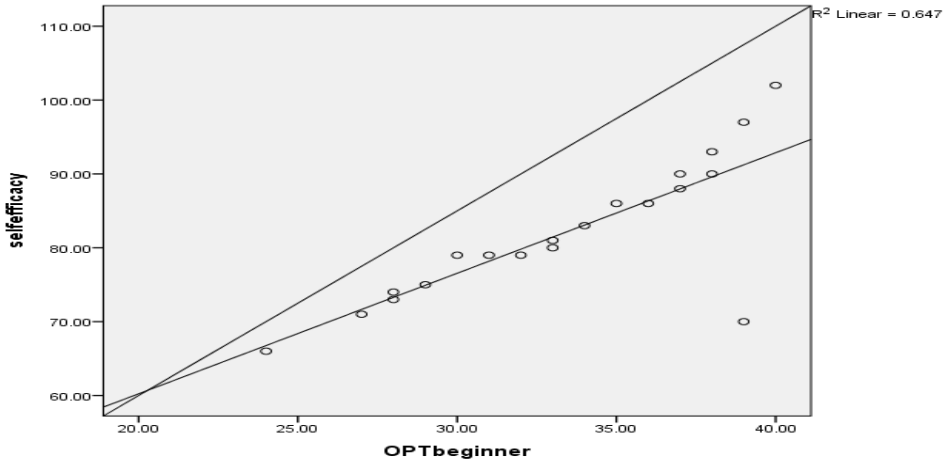

Figure 3. Scatter plot of OPT and self-efficacy at low level

Testing the Second research question

In order to test the second null-hypothesis suggesting that there is no relationship between general English achievement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners and their self-efficacy, the Pearson-product moment formula was conducted. The results are presented in the table 4.

Table 4. *Correlations between OPT of intermediate EFL learners and their self-efficacy*

		OPT intermediate	**Self-efficacy**
OPT intermediate	Pearson Correlation	1	.916**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.916**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Table 4 depicts a strong positive correlation between OPT and self-efficacy (r=.91, n=20. p< .05). Therefore, the second null hypothesis is safely rejected. In other words, there is a relationship between general English achievement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners and their self-efficacy. Figure 4 indicates the scatter plot of both variables.

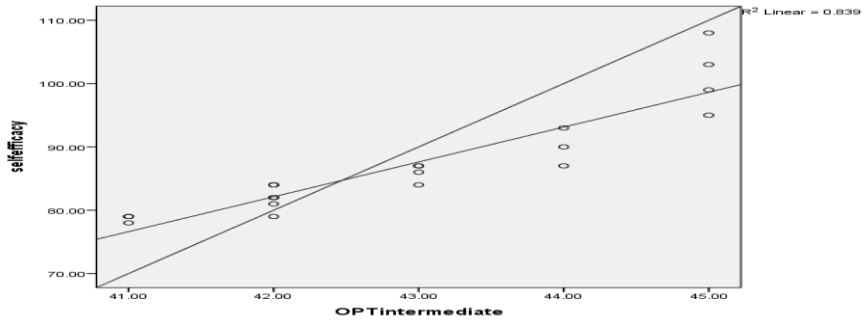

Figure 4. Scatter plot of OPT and self-efficacy at intermediate level

Testing the Third Research Question

In order to test the third null-hypothesis suggesting that there is no relationship between general English achievement of Iranian advanced EFL learners and their self-efficacy, the Pearson-product moment formula was conducted. The results are presented in the table 5.

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Table 5. *Correlations OPT and Self-efficacy at advanced level*

		OPT advance	Self-efficacy
OPT advance	Pearson Correlation	1	.979**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	20	20
Self-efficacy	Pearson Correlation	.979**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	20	20

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 4.4 depicts a strong positive correlation between OPT and self-efficacy (r=.97, n=20. p< .05). Therefore, the third null hypothesis is safely rejected. In other words, there is a relationship between general English achievement of Iranian intermediate EFL learners and their self-efficacy. Figure 5 indicates the scatter plot of both variables.

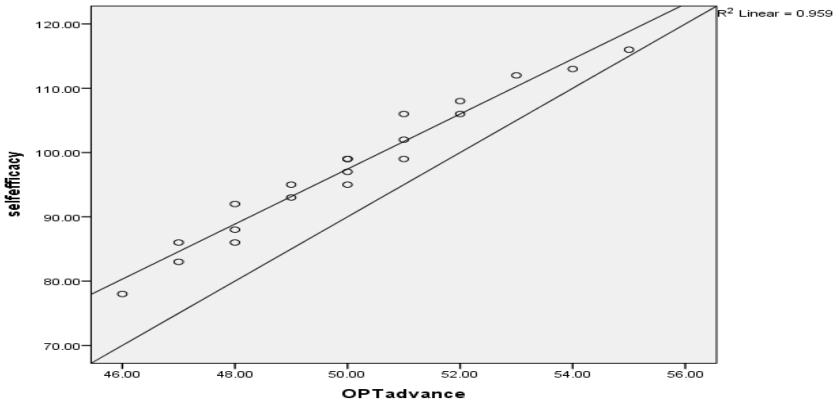

Figure 5. Scatter plot of OPT and self-efficacy at advanced level

In order to probe the difference between students with different proficiency level and their self efficacy One-Way ANOVA between group analyses was conducted to compute the differences between the means of these groups. A descriptive statistics of the self-efficacy of three groups and the test of homogeneity of variance is also presented in the following tables.

Table 6. *Descriptive statistics of the self efficacy at three levels*

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
beginner	20	82.1000	9.43063	2.10875	77.6863	86.5137	66.00	102.00
intermediate	20	87.3500	8.38090	1.87403	83.4276	91.2724	78.00	108.00
advance	20	97.6500	10.46938	2.34102	92.7502	102.5498	78.00	116.00
Total	60	89.0333	11.35702	1.46619	86.0995	91.9672	66.00	116.00

Table 7. *Test of Homogeneity of Variances data*

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.643	2	57	.530

The one-way ANOVA statistics for self-efficacy level and students different groups as shown in Tables 4.8 reveal that there are significant differences among three levels of students and their self efficacy level, that is the significant is 0.00 which is smaller than 0.05 and 0.01, so the difference between the groups are significant.

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Table 8. *One way ANOVA for the comparison of self efficacy data*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	2503.033	2	1251.517	13.969	.000
Within Groups	5106.900	57	89.595		
Total	7609.933	59			

We know that the students at different proficiency levels differ in their self-efficacy level, but we do not know exactly which two groups are different from each other. To locate the exact differences Post hoc comparison using the Tukey HSD test indicates that the self-efficacy for the advanced students was significantly different from intermediate and beginner students.

Table 9. *Tukey HSD test on self-efficacy score Dependent Variable: data Tukey HSD*

(I) selfefficacy	(J) selfefficacy	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
beginner	intermediate	-5.25000	2.99324	.194	-12.4530	1.9530
	advance	-15.55000*	2.99324	.000	-22.7530	-8.3470
intermediate	beginner	5.25000	2.99324	.194	-1.9530	12.4530
	advance	-10.30000*	2.99324	.003	-17.5030	-3.0970
advance	beginner	15.55000*	2.99324	.000	8.3470	22.7530
	intermediate	10.30000*	2.99324	.003	3.0970	17.5030

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

The schematic representation of students' performance at the three levels on their self-efficacy is presented in the following figure.

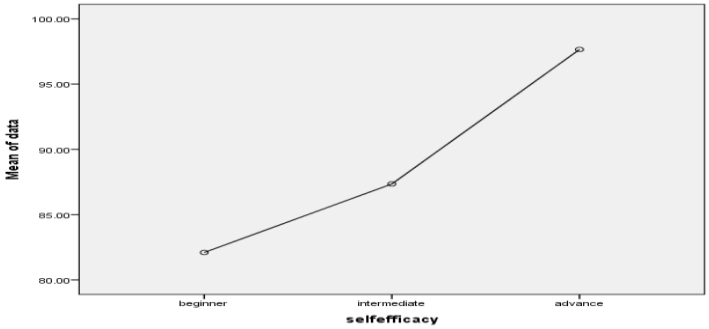

Figure 6. The mean plot of students' performance at the three levels on their self efficacy

Discussion

Recently, the significant influence of self efficacy on language achievement has been well proved. Self-efficacy is a term used to refer to a person's beliefs concerning his or her completion of a task and his or her perceived competency level with performing the task (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy has the potential to play a key role in the learning process by helping or hindering learner's progress (Bandura, 1984). Bandura further proposes that a person's attitudes, abilities, and cognitive skills cover what is known as the self-system. This system plays a main role in how we perceive situationsand how we behave in response to demanding situations. Self-efficacy is a factor that can differentiate successful from unsuccessful language learners.

Here in this study, the relationship between general English achievement of Iranian EFL learners and their self-efficacy at different proficiency was discovered. As it was reported in chapter 4, findings of data analysis in terms of Pearson correlation discovered that self-efficacy affected language proficiency level significantly and positively. Results of this study support the literature, proving the importance of EFL learners' self-efficacy about language learning. This finding supported the study done by Zimmerman, Bandura, and Martinez-Pons (1992) that stated academic self-efficacy influenced achievement directly as well as indirectly raising students' grades. This means that when there is academic self efficacy or self awareness of competence, the students achieve in their English language

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performance. As Bandura (1986) had stated the stronger the self-efficacy, the more likely the students select challenging tasks, persist at them and perform them successfully.

Following group analysis using ANOVA procedure, showed that there were significant differences among students with different proficiency level and their self-efficacy. It means that the self-efficacy for advanced students was significantly different from intermediate and beginner learners. It can be assumed from these findings that students with higher self efficacy have a better self perception regarding their competencies.Social learning theorists see self-efficacy as influencing future effort, persistence, learning, and achievement (Bandura, 1977, 1982, 1989a; Schunk, 1989a, 1989b; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992)."Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives. Self-efficacy beliefs determine how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave. Such beliefs produce these diverse effects through four major processes. They include cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes. (Bandura, 1994, p. 71)"By demonstrating high self-efficacy of advanced EFL learners in comparison to intermediate and beginner EFL learners, the study provided further evidence to support the connection and accepted the significant role of positive self-efficacy as one of the key factors to second or foreign language success. Consequently, both teachers and students should be made aware of the notion of self-efficacy, its origins and consequences, as well as the strategies for developing high and positive self-beliefs.

CONCLUSIONS

While this study has its own limitations, it is hoped that it can serve as a basis for further studies in language self-efficacy studies. The results provide valuable information to second/foreign language instructors. They show that the students' self-beliefs of language ability can influence their language achievement negatively or positively depending on the strength of their efficacy beliefs. Pajares (2000) mentioned that "Many, if not most, academic crises are crises of confidence."The findings of the study indicate the important role of self-efficacy in improving language achievements among EFL learners. This draws the attention of EFL teachers to encourage their learners to seek ways to improve their self-efficacy. It is necessary for instructors to help learners believe in their abilities and encourage them to expend greater efforts and time when facing failures rather than to attribute all their failures to their lack of abilities. Furthermore, Iranian high school teachers should be reminded of the role their negative attitudes might play in shaping their students' low self-perception. The view of considering learners' affect can also offer significant implications for curriculum designers. A learner-centered language curriculum may help language learners develop positive beliefs of their ability.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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