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# Waikato Journal of Education

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## The impact of context on Vietnamese EFL teachers' self-efficacy

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### Abstract

*The paper looked at contextual factors that influenced the self-efficacy in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) of a group of university teachers in Vietnam. Very little empirical research on teachers' self-efficacy in EFL contexts has been done and self-efficacy quantitative studies heavily outnumber qualitative studies. The present research took the form of a qualitative case study. Data collection tools included focus group discussions, individual interviews, journaling, and observations. Findings suggest that there were certain features of context, e.g. the state of leadership practices and collegiality, which may have affected what constituted sources of efficacy information and how they operated. In addition, it is plausible that changes in context, e.g. teaching different kinds of students, led to changes in the way the teachers weighed and selected efficacy information.*

### Keywords

Self-efficacy; qualitative; Vietnam; EFL teachers

### Introduction

In academic literature, a teacher's sense of self-efficacy is defined as "the teacher's belief in his or her capability to organize and execute courses of action required to successfully accomplish a specific teaching task in a particular context" (Tschannen-Moran, Hoy, & Hoy, 1998, p. 233). Research has indicated that teacher self-efficacy has important impacts on various aspects of teaching and learning. For example, teachers with a high sense of efficacy can motivate learners and improve their learning achievement (Guo, Connor, Yang, Roehrig, & Morrison, 2012; Mojavezi & Tamiz, 2012). Teachers with a strong sense of efficacy work more willingly with students who are having difficulties, invest considerable effort in finding appropriate teaching materials and activities, perform better, and are more likely to remain committed to their work (Klassen, Tze, Betts, & Gordon, 2011; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Because of the positive effects that self-efficacious teachers can have on students and teachers' own professional responsibilities, it is important to understand factors that may influence teacher self-efficacy.

Context is one important factor among others that can affect teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997, 2006; Siwatu, 2011). According to Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998), teachers establish their self-efficacy by judging their personal teaching competence (e.g. personal traits, professional knowledge and skills) in the light of environmental factors (e.g. student factors, teaching resources) that foster or constrain certain teaching practices in particular contexts. Put simply, teachers examine the context and then assess their capability to perform the task successfully within that context. In addition,



teachers' self-efficacy beliefs are expected to fluctuate according to context (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). For example, teachers' levels of efficacy vary when they teach different subjects, different learners and perform different teaching tasks. Given the vital role of context in influencing teacher self-efficacy, a growing volume of research has investigated this topic (e.g. Siwatu, 2011; Walker & Slear, 2011). However, most of the research has been done in Western settings and there is a dearth of research exploring the self-efficacy of language teachers (Klassen et al., 2011). Accordingly, this study was designed to extend our knowledge of how context might influence the self-efficacy in teaching EFL (English as a Foreign Language) of a group of Vietnamese university teachers. This research has the potential to inform teacher development in Vietnam and in similar settings with the view to supporting a high sense of efficacy among language teachers.

## Literature review

### Teacher self-efficacy

According to Bandura (1997), teacher self-efficacy is a type of perceived self-efficacy, "belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). It is one's self-perception of competence, not one's actual level of competence (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 211). Teacher self-efficacy should be "a judgment of capability" (Bandura, 1997, p. 43) and a "forward-looking capability" (Klassen et al., 2011, p. 26), not an intention to carry out a task. It is domain-, task-, and context-specific, e.g. under the influence of personal and environmental differences, an individual can judge his/her self-efficacy to perform similar tasks differently (Schunk, Pintrich, & Meece, 2008). Self-efficacy can help to predict how much effort people put forth, how well they persevere in coping with challenges and how effectively they regulate their thoughts, actions and plans (Bandura, 1993).

Bandura (1997) states that self-efficacy is best enhanced by a combination of four main sources of efficacy: mastery experiences (e.g. past experiences), vicarious experiences (e.g. observing other teachers), verbal persuasion (e.g. feedback), and physiological and emotional states (e.g. anxiety). Bandura (1997) also asserts that cognitive processing activates the operation of the sources, which then raises or lowers perceptions of self-efficacy (p. 81). Bandura emphasises that these rules of weighting and integrating efficacy information vary among individuals and depend heavily on the availability of sources of efficacy information as well as socio-contextual factors. This is because teachers may adjust the way they weigh and interpret efficacy-relevant information to adapt to changes in the context. In addition, Bandura (1997) asserts that experienced teachers' sense of efficacy tends to be resistant to modification unless there are critical events that invalidate their previous thinking.

### Relevant studies on the role of contextual factors in influencing teacher self-efficacy

In this section, I review how context has been investigated in teacher self-efficacy literature to further situate the study.

A large number of scholars (e.g. Chong, Klassen, Huan, Wong, & Kates, 2010; Kim & Kim, 2010; Siwatu, 2011; Walker & Slear, 2011) have investigated the impact of certain features of context such as school context (e.g. teaching resources, student factors), academic climate (e.g. emphasis on academic achievement), collegial support, leadership, and/or school setting (e.g. types of schools) on teacher self-efficacy. Researchers found that teachers in schools which offered adequate teaching resources felt more prepared and confident to teach than did their colleagues in schools which had poor-quality of school facilities and educational resources (Siwatu, 2011). Teachers' beliefs about their ability to teach were shaped in part by the attitudes and collaboration of other teachers (Chong et al., 2010; Devos, Dupriez, & Paquay, 2012). Teacher self-efficacy was significantly affected by principal behaviours (Walker & Slear, 2011). There was a positive link between student engagement and teacher self-efficacy (Guo, Justice, Sawyer, & Tompkins, 2011). Teachers reported higher self-efficacy in classrooms composed of high achieving students (Paneque & Barbetta, 2006). Such findings are important because they suggest the vital role of various contextual factors in shaping

teacher self-efficacy, i.e. leading to a higher or lower sense of efficacy beliefs. However, the mechanism by which these contextual factors exert influence on teacher self-efficacy is unclear.

Wyatt (2015) points out that context is often assessed by teachers' self-reports on Likert-scale items. Wheatley (2005) provides several examples from previous efficacy research to illustrate the fact that it is not easy to elicit explanations of teachers' cognitive processing of contextual factors and personal factors from numbers (p. 760). He stresses that because "teachers' efficacy beliefs *are themselves* complex, meaningful interpretations" (p. 559, italics in original), using only Likert-scaled instruments fails to capture such complex interpretations. Morris and Usher (2011) also note that the strength of qualitative studies in illuminating the synergy among the sources of efficacy information in comparison with quantitative studies is that they can provide clear examples of how participants internalize efficacy-relevant information in a complex way. For this reason, in my study, I chose to use a qualitative research approach to examine how context influenced Vietnamese teacher self-efficacy.

In addition, research on language teachers' self-efficacy in EFL contexts is still underrepresented within self-efficacy literature (Sabokrouh & Barimani-Varandi, 2013). Existing studies suggest a strong relationship between teachers' attitudes towards the English language and their self-efficacy (Lee, 2009; Sabokrouh & Barimani-Varandi, 2013), a positive relationship between teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and their language proficiency levels (Chacón, 2005; Ghasemboland & Hashim, 2013), and a link between teacher self-efficacy and their tendency to use grammatically or communicatively oriented pedagogical strategies (Chacón, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008). However, the question regarding the influence that contextual factors have on the self-efficacy beliefs of EFL teachers remains unanswered.

Moreover, researchers disagree on whether participating in a new setting can enhance teachers' self-efficacy beliefs. Many researchers support the idea that an intervention or development program aimed at fostering teachers' professional knowledge or successful teaching experiences can lead to positive changes in teachers' sense of self-efficacy beliefs (Gunning & Mensah, 2011; Locke & Dix, 2011; Puchner & Taylor, 2006). Some researchers, e.g. Moseley, Reinke, and Bookout (2003), however, argue that teachers' sense of self-efficacy did not appear to be easily influenced by such programs, especially when the programs offered simple materials (no information for the improvement of professional knowledge) and no opportunities to get feedback from students and mentors and to reinforce new knowledge (limited opportunities for vicarious and mastery experiences). Therefore, this study aimed to explore whether participating in a project can bring changes in teacher self-efficacy.

This brief review has indicated the paucity of qualitative research on investigating how teachers process contextual factors to construct their self-efficacy, given that the impact of context on EFL teachers' sense of self-efficacy has been neglected in previous studies. Researchers disagree on whether participating on a project can lead to change in teacher self-efficacy. Therefore, this research, using a qualitative approach, aimed to understand how context influenced the self-efficacy in teaching EFL of a group of Vietnamese university teachers. The study addressed the following questions:

1. What are the Vietnamese teachers' perceptions of contextual factors that influence their self-efficacy in teaching EFL?
2. What is the impact of these factors on their self-efficacy?
3. What are the reported effects in self-efficacy in the participants as a result of the self-reflection process engaged in during the course of the research?

## Methods

### Participants

The participants in this study were eight university teachers, one male and seven females, who teach General English and IELTS for students who have failed the university entrance exam to any other universities and subsequently register at one of three joint-programmes: business administration, information technology, and accounting and auditing. The university where the teachers worked is a technical university in the South of Vietnam. The teachers' age ranged from 30 to 42. The years of

teaching experience ranged from 7 to 17 years. All teachers have earned Master's Degrees in TESOL from different universities in Vietnam. The teachers were labelled by numbers for the sake of confidentiality (i.e. Teacher 1–Teacher 8).

## Research instruments

The study took the form of a qualitative study because qualitative research assumes that knowledge is constructed out of ongoing human interactions and is developed within a social context (Stake, 1995, 2010). Qualitative research looks for understanding of human subjective experience, of participants' perspectives on their actions and on the contexts surrounding them (Maxwell, 2005). I employed individual interviews, journaling, observation and focus group discussion as research tools in my study. The data collection period lasted 6 months.

Focus group discussion was used at the beginning and the end of my data collection period to understand the teachers' stories of how they negotiated context in constructing their self-efficacy. Kitzinger (1994, as cited in Phan, 2015, p. 75) states that "a focus group discussion consisting of people who already know each other as colleagues and friends might facilitate the process of remembering shared values and norms in work or life experiences". Collecting private interpretations of the participants' experiences was also important in the study since some of the contextual factors which emerged from teachers' perceptions of relationships with colleagues, leaders and students seemed to be sensitive to the Vietnamese culture (Pham, 2008; Tran, 2006). In addition, the interaction between two people, the researcher and one participant, would give me more opportunities to investigate the world of each teacher in depth (Barbour, 2007, p. 42). Therefore, two rounds of individual interviews were one main data tool for the study. As in the focus group discussion, a semi-structured set of questions was employed in each one-to-one interview. In my study, participants were invited to keep journal entries over the period of three months. Journaling helped me to keep track of and understand each participant's perspective on significant events and experiences in their own words (Hood, 2009). A weekly entry kept over three months might be considered as systematic data (Faizah, 2008) which I believed would help to trace possible changes in, or development of, the teachers' perceptions of the impacts of ongoing activities, although such change or development might not occur for all participants. Observation in the study served as a foundation for interviews and contextualised findings of interviews and reflective entries. I chose non-participant observation because a complete observer does not interfere with people or activities under observation (Creswell, 2012, p. 214). I conducted 4 classroom observations and 25 observations of teachers' formal and informal meetings. Although only two female participants agreed to let me sit in their classrooms twice over the data collection period, this negative reaction of my participants served as a basis for forming questions to understand what led to their refusal of classroom observations in subsequent interviews. This contributed to my comprehensive understanding of factors that affected their self-efficacy.

To analyse data, I used an inductive coding process (Creswell, 2012) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The collection, analysis and interpretation of data were influenced by my experience as a teacher of English and by my cultural background as a Vietnamese. To warrant the trustworthiness of my study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), I employed a number of strategies such as member checking, triangulation, thick description, peer reviews, and prolonged engagement in the field (Creswell & Miller, 2000, pp. 124-129).

## Findings

### Teaching recognition

It appears that how the study teachers' teaching ability was recognised by leaders, colleagues and students influenced their self-perception of their teaching competence. Different forms of appreciation from students and colleagues increased teachers' sense of personal teaching competence. For example, receiving students' emails asking for learning advice and thanking her made Teacher 1 believe that her strictness in requiring students to write weekly essays contributed to her successful teaching. Teacher

2 mentioned students' seeking help inside and outside the classroom as recognition of her teaching ability. She said that the students asked teachers a lot of questions only when they believed that the teacher was able to help them. Teacher 2 was the only teacher in the study who stated that her perception of teaching competence increased thanks to colleagues' feedback. She said that:

These colleagues' behaviour [asking for teaching advice] made me believe that I am respected for what I have, for my teaching results, my teaching ability. They respect me. I think they believe I am a qualified teacher.

While the study teachers' perception of their teaching competence appeared to be increased by students and colleagues' verbal and non-verbal behaviours, the feedback coming from leaders decreased teachers' beliefs in their teaching ability. All teachers complained that there was either a lack of recognition or face value recognition of their teaching ability and effort at the university. Such non-existent or minimal recognition (a negative form of social persuasion) led to a feeling of disappointment (negative emotion) when teaching was not valued, or a feeling of confusion and self-doubt about how competent they were in teaching EFL. For example, all teachers used negative words and phrases to respond to my question of how leaders rewarded their teaching ability: "no one says anything", "never hear anything", "that never happens", "never". The teachers said that they did not know whether their teaching ability "[was] good enough" or whether they "contribute[d] enough" or "what should be changed". The lack of recognition seemed to produce in teachers a sense of knowledge inadequacy or worry that their teaching strategies were not effective.

## Teaching support

### *Opportunities for professional development*

How the study teachers perceived support from colleagues and leaders at the university regarding improvement of their professional knowledge and skills appeared to negatively influence their analysis of teaching tasks in relation to their competence since they did not feel encouraged either to improve their practice or to incorporate new strategies in the classroom. The study teachers all agreed that collegiality existed but was found only in small groups of teachers who were close friends. Data from observation sessions indicate that at teacher meetings, the study teachers always sat and whispered in their own groups, and rarely contributed to discussions. During follow-up discussions after observation sessions, Teachers 1–5 said that the content of monthly teacher meetings disappointed them. The teachers used a lot of negative words and phrases to describe meeting topics and the attitudes of attendees: "irrelevant topics", "no contribution to professional knowledge", "useless", "general topics", "no one shares teaching strategies or new ideas". The follow-up discussions helped to reveal that teacher silence at meetings resulted from their feelings of boredom. The teachers wished that university leaders would invite them to discuss professional topics such as instructional goals or improving teaching performance but the content of the meetings was contrary to these wishes. The teachers also expressed a hope to officially observe their peers teach to exchange teaching knowledge and skills. Three teachers, Teacher 2, 3 and 4, also observed that there was a serious lack of professional development courses or conferences for EFL teachers at the university. These three teachers emphasised that the lack of these opportunities prevented them from "improv[ing]" or "updat[ing]" their teaching strategies.

### *Physical working constraints*

All study teachers stated that teaching resources, technical support, classroom arrangements, class size, and student groupings significantly affected their task implementation, as they perceived these physical working conditions constrained their daily practice. For example, Teacher 1 related an increased difficulty of tasks to the usual replacement of textbooks by photocopied materials at the beginning of every semester. She reported that students "did not like the materials" or "became lazy" when learning with these "temporary" materials. She found herself very "anxious" whenever the new semester started because she had to confront "students' complaints about textbooks". Teachers 3 and 4 discussed how technical support provided by the university hampered their effort to teach better. Their lesson was reported to be "interrupted" because of faulty equipment, and this was exacerbated by slow

technical support. The two teachers emphasised that this slow support was “quite usual” and significantly made them feel “dissatisfied” and “unhappy” because “it was not [their] fault” that the lesson “became lengthy and boring”. Teachers 2, 3 and 4 reported that the lack of soundproofing of classroom walls prevented them from using interactive activities in the classroom. Teachers 5 and 6 complained about the quality of speakers, projectors and blackboards at the university. Teacher 6 wrote that many times she and her students “lost interest in teaching and learning” because they had to “move up and down” the building to find a vacant room with a good projector. Teachers 2 and 4 wrote that they “[could] not provide help to every student” when the number of students was over twenty. All teachers reported negative feelings: “uncomfortable”, “unhappy”, “stressed” and “tired” when teaching classes which consisted of students with different levels of proficiency.

### Supervision and decision making process

The study teachers’ sense of their ability to meet task requirements appeared to be influenced negatively by how they perceived they were being supervised and by their degree of involvement in decision-making processes at the institution. The teachers reported negative feelings when experiencing teaching supervision practice at the institution. For example, Teacher 7 felt “irritated” and “uncomfortable” when a supervisor sometimes “stood behind the classroom window” and “stared” into his classroom. He felt that that supervisor was “watching” his actions, which made him “less concentrated on teaching” and “los[e] motivation to teach”. In addition, all teachers reported that they were not genuinely encouraged to get involved in institutional decisions, which was another version of a lack of trust on the part of the leaders. They all mentioned the institution’s recent decision to reduce the number of English learning periods and to require teachers to improve teaching quality without asking teachers’ opinions. Teacher 7 said that it was “impossible” for teachers at the university to “maintain”, let alone to “improve” teaching quality, when they did not have enough time to teach in the classroom. All the teachers emphasised that the approval of the decision without teachers’ contribution created “teaching pressure” and “teaching anxiety” for the teachers because it forced them to do a thing that they believed they could not do. Their teaching tasks seemed to become more difficult owing to supervisors’ intrusion into their instructional time and a lack of trust from leaders.

### Learner characteristics

The study teachers’ perceptions of students’ background knowledge, behaviour and learning progress in relation to each type of students appeared to affect their beliefs about their capacity to fulfil task requirements. In classes of strong, highly motivated students, the teachers reported feeling comfortable to deliver a range of more interactive activities. For example, Teacher 2 said that in a class of advanced students she used “more games”, “more speaking activities”. Teacher 7 also said that he “adjusted” some textbook tasks into “competitive games” to use in classrooms of high achieving students. Students’ positive learning behaviour and progress encouraged teachers to believe that their teaching instruction was effective or the tasks were manageable. This, in turn, brought the teachers positive feelings and encouraged them to put more effort into improving their teaching. For example, Teacher 6 wrote in one of her reflective entries:

In replying to my question of whether they understood how to write this particular type of essay thoroughly, they all together shouted ‘yeah’. I felt very happy. I was successful. My lesson was effective. This will be a very big motive for my next teaching sessions. I will definitely stick to my technique and try to make it better.

In contrast, teaching unmotivated, less able students seemed to cause a sense of the unmanageability of various instructional tasks among the study teachers. The teachers stated that students with low ability and lacking in motivation hindered their ability to implement learning tasks and deliver instruction in the classroom. All of them described their instruction in such classes as “short”, “concise” and “simple” and reported giving fewer interactive activities and more “boring” and “repetitive” ones. When students responded to instructional efforts with inattention and lack of interest or did not make learning progress, the teachers sounded helpless. For example, Teachers 2, 5 and 6 wrote that they “gave up” teaching these students and “let them do anything in the classroom”.

Teacher 3 felt such students were “difficult to teach” and acted as if she “[did] not hear, [did] not see” those students who behaved badly in the classroom. The teachers also displayed negative feelings. For example, teaching struggling students made Teacher 6 feel “tired” or “disappointed” because the students “did not have enough vocabulary to understand textbook instructions”.

### **Pedagogical knowledge and skills**

Study teachers' perceptions of their pedagogical knowledge and skills had the potential to enhance or diminish their self-efficacy. At early phases of the study, all teachers displayed a strong belief that their pedagogical knowledge and skills enabled them to teach students effectively. For example, Teacher 6 seemed to possess a strong belief in her ability to design tasks and instruct students. She said:

I see I know how to design tasks to suit my learners' proficiency levels. ... I can implement these tasks. ... I happily see my students can do these tasks in accordance with my plan.

All teachers blamed students or other environmental factors for unsuccessful teaching experiences. For example, Teacher 2 said:

Most students who failed exams were very lazy. ... I don't think that their exam failure was caused by my teaching style. I think that it was certainly because they did not want to learn.

Towards the end of my data collection period, the teachers' strong sense of self-efficacy fluctuated, owing to a change in their perceptions of professional knowledge which emerged from interactions with other teacher participants and from reflections on the study themes. In relation to specific teaching aspects, they perceived themselves to have adequate or inadequate knowledge and skills; accordingly, the teachers experienced a strengthened or diminished sense of self-efficacy. For example, Teacher 4's sense of competence in her use of interactive activities in the classroom was strengthened through her reflection on and comparison of her teaching experiences with those of her colleagues. Teacher 7 reported a successful adjustment in using challenging tasks in the classroom—“select[ing] questions in accordance with students' knowledge levels” in his words—which boosted his self-efficacy in using the technique. All teachers except Teachers 4 and 7 were no longer able to ignore struggling students in their classrooms. However, they experienced a diminished sense of self-efficacy in teaching the students due to feelings of knowledge inadequacy. They felt that they were “incompetent”, “unable” because they “were not trained” and needed to “upgrade knowledge and skills”.

## **Discussions**

### **Contextual factors shaping sources of self-efficacy information**

In the study, findings suggest that there were certain features of context that affected what constituted sources of efficacy information and how they operated. Leadership practice and collegiality at the university where the teachers were employed seemed to limit the availability of mastery experiences and vicarious experiences, thus highlighting the role of social persuasion. Lack of professional development opportunities seemed to deprive study teachers of formal opportunities to watch others teach and share experiences (vicarious experiences), thus constraining access to the mastery of professional knowledge which Palmer (2006, p. 340) refers to as “cognitive pedagogical mastery”. Enactive mastery—mastery of previous teaching experiences (Bandura, 1997)—was elusive since teachers' perceptions of successful teaching was affected by the feedback of others—students, colleagues, and leaders—but teachers were never given genuine recognition or feedback by leaders and rarely by colleagues.

Findings also suggest that leadership practice at the university conditioned the forms of social persuasion and emotional states available. The teachers in the study perceived supervisors' intrusion on their teaching time and the implementation of new educational policies at the workplace as

indicating a lack of trust in their teaching competence (negative forms of social persuasion). Teachers reported feeling disappointment, self-doubt and anxiety due to a lack of support from leaders. The availability and condition of teaching resources and the nature of classroom arrangements all created teaching pressures, anxiety, unhappiness and dissatisfaction among the teachers. Bandura (1997) states that the self-affirming beliefs of others can promote or diminish development of skills and a sense of self-efficacy in individuals (p. 101). The university where the study teachers worked sent messages which the teachers interpreted as suggesting that they were not valuable or competent staff, or they were not supported to teach in the way they believed they should be. Exposure to an unsupportive environment can potentially lead to teachers' diminished sense of self-efficacy.

The above findings corroborates Bandura's (1997) and Tschannen-Moran and colleagues' (1998) assertion that context informs and conditions the formation of teacher self-efficacy. The powerful influence of context in shaping sources of self-efficacy is also confirmed in previous studies. For example, contextual factors and the environment in part highlighted the influence of vicarious experience on self-efficacy (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000), resulted in the critical effect of social persuasion on self-efficacy (Milner, 2002), and made mastery experiences the most relevant sources of efficacy information for participants (Atay, 2007; Palmer, 2006, 2011).

### Contextual factors mediating self-efficacy

In the study, the self-efficacy of eight study teachers was subject to change as a result of the context in which the appraisals were made. All teachers experienced a high sense of self-efficacy and tended to use more interactive activities when teaching highly motivated, high achieving students. In contrast, they experienced a low sense of self-efficacy when teaching low-achieving and badly behaved students. Besides, positive feedback the teachers received from students and colleagues seemed to boost their self-efficacy while lack of feedback from leaders diminished their self-efficacy. The finding that teachers' self-efficacy fluctuated in different contexts is consistent with Bandura's (1997) assertion that self-efficacy is context specific. This finding also lends support to that of previous studies (e.g. Capa & Hoy, 2005; Chong et al., 2010; Guo et al., 2011; Hansen, 2005; Hoy & Woolfolk, 1993; Kim & Kim, 2010) that the setting of the school influences perceptions of teaching self-efficacy, as discussed earlier.

On the other hand, the finding that the self-efficacy of experienced teachers fluctuated owing to a change in their perceptions of pedagogical knowledge after participating in the study appears to contrast with a view which has generally been adopted among other researchers, that as teachers become more experienced, changes in self-efficacy are less likely (Siwatu, 2011; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Bandura (1997) suggests that changes in an experienced teacher's self-efficacy beliefs are only likely to occur in the event of strong experiences that disrupt the pre-existing belief in their capabilities. It is plausible that in the current study, a new type of experience brought about a fluctuation in self-efficacy in relation to teaching EFL.

In the initial states of the study, the teachers reported having a strong belief in personal teaching competence and negative interpretations of environmental factors. Findings indicate that the teachers operated in a work culture which was characterised by individualism and isolation. In this work culture, the teachers experienced many negative forms of social persuasion, and a lack of vicarious and mastery experiences. They seemed to be vulnerable to negative emotions. In part owing to an aspect of Vietnamese culture, that is, a particular concept of "face" (Pham, 2008; Tran, 2006), this work culture preserved both a positive sense of personal teaching competence and negative interpretations of environmental factors (i.e. I have the ability to teach; it is because of either students or the working environment that this teaching is not successful).

On the other hand, findings indicate that participating in the study encouraged a reflectiveness which the researcher and teachers had not employed prior to the study. The teachers indicated that the themes of the study, especially those emerging from specific questions such as: "What is your strong point in teaching EFL?" or "What contributed to your successful/unsuccessful sessions?" helped them reflect on which teaching aspects they were competent in. Writing journal entries and discussions with the researcher and other teachers also provided the teachers with opportunities to review past teaching practices, to review students' feedback, to compare their own practices to those of colleagues and to compare their former and more recent practices in order to re-evaluate their teaching abilities. Such

reflections prompted the teachers to consider implementing changes in the classroom. It is probable that knowledge growth and perceived successful attempts to implement changes in the classroom resulted in an enhanced or reinforced sense of self-efficacy. Conversely, perceptions of an unsuccessful adjustment of teaching experiences and a perceived lack of professional knowledge and skills led to a weakened sense of self-efficacy. The teachers' awareness of their lack of professional knowledge and skills to teach unmotivated, low-achieving students was inconsistent with their self-perceptions in this regard during previous data collection steps. Although this awareness contributed to their diminished sense of self-efficacy, it is positive in the sense that the teachers acknowledged that their practices were not as good as they had previously believed and that accordingly improvement was required.

## Conclusion

My study draws attention to the role of context in altering self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). It demonstrates that several features of local context shape sources of efficacy information and adds to the contribution of qualitative inquiry in investigating this issue in the self-efficacy literature. Interviews with teachers, journaling, and observations provided a unique glimpse into the complex environments in which self-efficacy beliefs emerge. Semi-structured interviews allowed for participants to elaborate on their experiences, which shed light on the significant role of social persuasion and the minor role of mastery experiences and vicarious experiences as a function of context. The study addresses the lack, raised by Wyatt (2013) and Labone (2004), of qualitative studies that investigated in any depth the impact of context on teacher self-efficacy.

Findings included teachers' concerns about leadership and its effects on their self-efficacy and teaching practices. Institutional support with regard to providing clearer policies, giving teachers more freedom in the classroom and more opportunities to get involved in the decision-making process might help teachers overcome feelings of doubt about how competent they were in their teaching. Such support has the potential to strengthen teacher self-efficacy and teaching practices (Bandura, 1993). Moreover, it would be helpful to improve teaching conditions at the university, including providing enough textbooks and reducing class size, because adequate teaching resources and working conditions have generally been found to raise teacher self-efficacy (Siwatu, 2011). Improved leadership practice will be likely to engender a positive sense of self-efficacy among staff and equip them to overcome a low sense of self-efficacy (Walker & Slear, 2011).

In the study, it appeared that interaction with the researcher and other teachers created opportunities for the participating teachers to self-reflect and re-evaluate teaching practices and teaching abilities, and this led to changes in their self-efficacy. It seemed that teachers collaborated to a greater extent than previously with colleagues both within the group and in the faculty at large. Through the self-reflection process which partly resulted from teacher collaboration, teachers became aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and the need to improve or upgrade their professional skills and knowledge. The value of teacher self-reflectiveness to their self-efficacy and teaching practices (Locke, Whitehead, & Dix, 2013), which was the result of teacher collaboration, calls for the setting up of learning communities (Wenger, 1998) or Critical Friends Groups (Franzak, 2002). Such professional communities may offer teachers more opportunities to review their practices, to collaborate, to learn from, and to negotiate the meaning of their teaching with one another. Accordingly, it is probable that teachers will develop their confidence in teaching EFL in the long term.

Findings also indicate that the initially high sense of personal teaching efficacy of some teachers was later shaken when they perceived a shortfall in their own current levels of professional skills and knowledge. The development of professional programs or courses at the home institution that meet their knowledge needs may enable teachers to overcome doubt about their teaching abilities and engender in them a positive sense of self-efficacy (Locke et al., 2013).

It should be noted that the study investigated the self-efficacy of a group of teachers over a period of six months, longitudinal studies being desirable to help understand context-influenced changes in teacher self-efficacy. It is possible that participants overestimated or underestimated the role of efficacy-relevant information. It is also feasible that they were unable to remember past events or

uncomfortable to disclose certain personal information. Thus this study suffers from the shortcomings of self-report studies.

Despite these limitations, this study represents an encouraging attempt to investigate the influence of context on language teacher self-efficacy, particularly in the rarely explored EFL settings. Given the importance of supporting sustainable teacher development (Kirkpatrick, 2011), a research on the impact of context on teacher self-efficacy can provide clues to improve and enhance the competence in teaching of language teachers.

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