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Exploration on Methods of Stimulating and Maintaining Students' English Learning Self-Efficacy

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Abstract: This study examines the role of student self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed, within contemporary education. Recognizing its critical impact on motivation, strategy use, and academic performance, the research addresses a practical need for classroom-based methods to cultivate this attribute. Based on Bandura's theory, it identifies four key sources of self-efficacy: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional state. To apply the theory into practice, the article proposes three strategies for educators: training students in effective learning strategies, designing scaffolded tasks to ensure successful experiences, and utilizing relatable peer models. The study argues that intentionally fostering self-efficacy is essential for developing resilient, self-directed learners and represents a vital shift toward holistic, quality-oriented education.

Keywords: Self-Efficacy; English Learning; Learning Strategies.

1. Introduction

1.1. Background to the research

With the in-depth development of global educational reform and quality-oriented education, education's core goal has shifted to cultivating comprehensive individuals. Proposed by Bandura, self-efficacy is an individual's subjective judgment of their ability to complete tasks. For students, it is key to learning motivation and a core driving force for growth. Researchers have found that students' self-efficacy is closely related to their academic performance and mental health. High self-efficacy brings positive learning attitudes and resilience, while low self-efficacy leads to anxiety, lack of confidence and learning burnout. However, Some educators overemphasize academic performance and ignore psychological needs, and there are no targeted methods for students' different self-efficacy levels. Facing complex learning challenges, exploring scientific methods to stimulate and maintain students' self-efficacy has become an urgent educational issue.

1.2. Purpose and significance of the study

The core purpose of this study is to systematically identify the key influencing factors of students' self-efficacy in the current teaching environment, and further explore simple, operable and targeted methods to stimulate and maintain students' self-efficacy, so as to provide specific and practical guidance for front-line educators in their daily teaching work.

In terms of theoretical significance, this study further enriches the application scenarios of Bandura's social cognitive theory in modern educational practice, and supplements the existing research results on the methods of cultivating students' self-efficacy. In terms of practical significance, it can help educators optimize and improve their teaching strategies, effectively assist students in building firm learning confidence, stimulate their learning initiative and enthusiasm, promote their all-round development, and further promote the in-depth development of quality-oriented education in practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Key concepts

2.1.1. Self-efficacy

Traditional behaviorism points that behavior is determined by external rewards and punishments, overlooking the influence of individual cognitive and emotional factors on behavior. However, Bandura pointed out that people do not only react to external stimuli but they can also be influenced by their own behavior through thinking, anticipation, and evaluation. Thus, he proposed the concept of self-efficacy and he defined self-efficacy as "the degree to which individuals believe they can successfully perform a task using their existing skills."[1] He views self-efficacy as the expectation of one's ability to successfully complete specific tasks, considering expectation as the intermediary that connects cognition and behavior, and as a determinant of behavior. He categorized this expectation into outcome expectations and efficacy expectations. Outcome expectations refer to an individual's prediction of whether a certain behavior will lead to a specific result, while efficacy expectations refer to an individual's belief in their own ability to effectively perform a behavior to achieve a certain outcome [2]. In 1998, Stakovic and Ruvic provided a broader and more practical definition: "Self-efficacy refers to an individual's firm belief (or confidence) in their ability to successfully complete a specific task within a given context by mobilizing the necessary motivation, cognitive resources, and a series of actions."[3]

2.1.2. Academic self-efficacy

Academic self-efficacy is developed on the foundation of self-efficacy theory, representing its application within the domains of education and learning, and integrating related theories from educational psychology and learning psychology. Wang Yanfang and her colleagues reports that academic self-efficacy refers to learners' evaluation of their confidence in utilizing their existing abilities or skills to accomplish learning tasks. It is a subjective estimation of whether an individual can control their learning behaviors and academic performance. Academic self-efficacy is a manifestation of self-efficacy within the learning domain and

may also influence anxiety to some extent[4]. Bian Yufang notes that academic self-efficacy is the embodiment of self-efficacy in the context of learning, referring to the degree of confidence students have in using their abilities and skills to complete learning tasks. It is a subjective estimation of an individual's capability to regulate their learning behaviors and academic outcomes. Academic self-efficacy reflects students' subjective expectations and confidence in their learning abilities, serving as a crucial factor influencing academic performance. It represents an individual's assessment of their own learning capabilities and plays a guiding role in the learning process as a subjective experience.[5]

2.2. Related studies home and abroad

McCarthy notes that self-efficacy is closely related to students' academic performance[6]. Pintrich & DeGroot found that self-efficacy was positively correlated with cognitive and control strategies. They believed that self-efficacy acts as a mediator or "facilitator" in cognitive engagement, enhancing the use of strategies and improving academic achievement[7]. Zimmerman, B.J.proposed that students' self-efficacy influences their learning motivation through autonomous learning processes such as goal setting, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and strategy use. The stronger they perceive their abilities, the more likely they are to set challenging learning goals. Students with high self-efficacy are more able to self-monitor their learning[8] and have a positive impact on their goal orientation and academic performance [9].

There is also extensive domestic research on academic self-efficacy. Chen Junshan's studyfound a close relationship between junior high school students' English learning self-efficacy and their academic performance[10]. Students with high English self-efficacy were confident in their learning abilities, believe they could master the subject, and thus achieve excellent English grades. Wang Kairong and othersdemonstrated that self-efficacy directly affected academic performance, while attribution influenced academic performance through self-efficacy[11]. Li Hui's research showed that the self-efficacy of middle school students was significantly correlated with their academic performance in subjects like Chinese and mathematics[12]. Li Bing and others found that learning self-efficacy had a far greater impact on academic achievement levels than other factors[13]. In regression coefficient significance and path analysis, Zuo Bin and others' study on the effect of learning self-efficacy on academic performance indicated that academic self-efficacy was a strong predictor of academic achievement[14]. Yang Xinde found that the learning self-efficacy levels of academically struggling students were significantly lower than those of high-achieving students[15]. Wang Zhenhong showed that in terms of academic self-efficacy, high-achieving students scored significantly higher on average than medium- and low-achieving students[16].

2.3. Factors Influencing Self-Efficacy

After conducting extensive research on the conditions for developing self-efficacy and its impact on behavior, Bandura and his students discovered: “The formation of self-efficacy primarily stems from four distinct pathways: first, through former experiences of success and failure; second, through the demonstration effect of others; third, through social persuasion that informs individuals of their capacity for success; and fourth, through emotional states and physiological arousal.”[17]

2.3.1. Former success and failures

Past experiences of success and failure exert the greatest influence on the formation of an individual's self-efficacy. Successful experiences can foster a high sense of self-efficacy, while failures may diminish it, particularly when an individual has not yet developed a strong sense of self-efficacy [18]. Generally speaking, success enhances an individual's self-efficacy evaluation, while repeated failures diminish their sense of self-efficacy. Once an individual develops a strong sense of self-efficacy through consistent success, occasional setbacks have minimal impact on their self-assessment of ability. For instance, students who consistently perform well academically won't let a single poor exam score undermine their self-evaluation of academic achievement. They are more likely to attribute such failures to environmental factors, insufficient effort, or ineffective study strategies.

2.3.2. Substitute experience

The formation of self-efficacy is significantly influenced by vicarious experiences provided by social role models. When people observe individuals similar to themselves achieving success through sustained effort, they become to believe that they can possess the capacity for success. Therefore, when students observe peers with similar backgrounds succeeding in learning activities, they come to believe that they can achieve success in comparable situations. This fosters a heightened sense of academic self-efficacy. Conversely, witnessing peers with similar abilities fail, especially after considerable effort, that will diminish their assessment of their own academic self-efficacy.

2.3.3. Verbal Persuasion

Verbal persuasion uses words to convince people that they have the ability to achieve the success they desire, including others' evaluations or students' self-persuasion. When faced with challenges, students who are persuaded that they are capable of completing learning tasks will invest more sustained effort to achieve success than those who doubt their abilities and focus on their shortcomings. By increasing students' learning self-efficacy through verbal persuasion to a certain level, they can be motivated to exert strenuous effort for success.

2.3.4. Emotional state and physiological arousal

When evaluating their own ability levels, people rely on information about their emotional and physiological states, which significantly influences their interpretation of internal conditions. The ever-changing external environment and the meaning attributed to it affect the relationship between physiological arousal and self-efficacy [19]. Changes in an individual's emotional and physiological states directly influence the formation and development of self-efficacy. Generally, when an individual is in a calm state, they exhibit composure and confidence, and also anticipate success, leading to enhance self-efficacy. Conversely, when an individual is in a state of irritability or emotional agitation, they become susceptible to negative stimuli, which hinders the improvement of self-efficacy. The influence of physiological state on self-efficacy depends on prior experiences affecting behavioral performance. When individuals lack confidence in their coping abilities, low self-efficacy may heighten sensitivity to physiological arousal. Changes in physiological arousal can provide misleading feedback, revealing cognitive biases in interpreting bodily

sensations[20].

3. Problem Solutions

3.1. Solutions

3.1.1. Training learning strategies

The formation and enhancement of self-efficacy largely depend on the abundance of an individual's successful experiences. Individuals with low self-efficacy primarily experience frequent setbacks, leading them to doubt their capacity to accomplish specific tasks or activities. The same applies to learning. If students consistently perform poorly on exams and assignments and frequently encounter difficulties while solving problems, they may doubt their own learning abilities. In severe cases, this can lead to "learned helplessness," , naturally diminishing their sense of self-efficacy in learning. Among the factors influencing learning outcomes or academic performance, apart from individual effort, the most crucial element is learning strategies. The more effective strategies one employs, the higher the grades achieved and the greater the self-efficacy. Students with low English self-efficacy often lack effective English learning strategies. For instance, Zhang Tong's research revealed a significant positive correlation between senior high school students' English learning strategies and their English grades, yet the frequency of strategy use among high school students remains relatively low [21] . Li Yusheng and Wang Hongyuan's researchfound that high school students' English learning strategies were significantly positively correlated with their self-efficacy in English learning[22]. However, high school students' frequency of using learning strategies is relatively low. Therefore, educating and guiding students in learning strategies can effectively improve English learning outcomes and self-efficacy. For instance, Wang Lirong conducted listening strategy training for high school students, covering note-taking, self-assessment, self-monitoring, self-encouragement, planning, anxiety reduction, and visualization[23]. The results revealed that the application of most strategies showed a significant positive correlation with English self-efficacy. Therefore, strengthening training in English learning strategies for high school students is essential. Teachers can tailor instruction based on student needs, focusing on three strategy types: metacognitive strategies, cognitive strategies, and social strategies. Alternatively, training can be organized according to specific content domains such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The guiding principles for training are practicality and concreteness, avoiding theoretical abstraction. Secondly, it should account for individual differences and preferences, ensuring learning strategies align with each learner's unique needs.

3.1.2. Creating learning scenarios to enhance students' successful experiences

Gaining direct success is the main way to enhance one's self-efficacy. Therefore, to enhance students' self-efficacy in learning, the primary approach is to help them experience more successes and fewer failures. Students who struggle with English often exaggerate the difficulties they encounter in learning, exhibiting severe fear of challenges. They assume they will fail without even trying, primarily because they have experienced too many setbacks in their studies, and suffer from low self-efficacy. For these students lacking overall proficiency in English and struggling with confidence, teachers should create opportunities for them to experience success through practice and application by designing specific scenarios based on each student's strengths and talents. This allows them to discover their own advantages and bright spots, achieve tangible "successes," and thereby enhance their sense of self-efficacy in English. For example, assigning students who enjoy writing to draft short articles for the English bulletin board, or having musically inclined students collect English audio-visual materials; Similarly, for students with weaker English grades but strong oral skills, teachers can give them opportunities to read texts aloud to the class or engage in English dialogues during lessons, followed by praise for their oral skills.

3.1.3. Learning from successful models

Self-efficacy is significantly influenced by the vicarious experiences provided by social role models[18]. For example, if someone observes another person of similar build successfully lifting a log that appears heavy, they may develop the belief that I can also lift that log. The same applies to English learning. Even though student themselves didn't study very well in the past, if they see other classmates achieving good results, they would also believe that they could achieve good results. Therefore, teachers should establish role models for English learning both inside and outside the classroom. They can share stories about classmates who have mastered English, or examples of famous people learning the language. The goal is to help students firmly believe that under similar circumstances, people like them can master English, and so can they. This belief itself is an expression of self-efficacy. When implementing successful role model learning, three points require attention: first, the role model must be appropriate. A suitable role model should be exemplary in their achievements and share similarities with the learner in various characteristics. Non-typical role models lack motivational value, while those too dissimilar from learners make emulation difficult. Second, role models must exhibit specific behaviors that can be learned and imitated, such as study methods or behavioral patterns. In other words, learners' acquisition of these models must be concrete and feasible. Third, learners must be provided opportunities for practical application. The ultimate goal of role-model learning is personal success through practice; mere observation without action equates to no learning. Therefore, after establishing role models and facilitating student learning, teachers should enable them to genuinely practice the behaviors they have imitated and learned. This allows them to learn through practice and personally experience success.

4. Conclusion

In summary, this research has systematically examined the critical role of self-efficacy within the educational landscape. Through a review of theoretical foundations and empirical studies, a student's belief in their own academic capabilities is not merely a peripheral aspect of learning but a fundamental driver of motivation, strategy use, resilience, and ultimate academic achievement. The current research shows that students with high academic self-efficacy approach challenges with greater confidence and persistence, whereas those with low self-efficacy are more susceptible to anxiety, helplessness, and underperformance.

The core of this study lies in translating this understanding into actionable pedagogical practice. Building upon Bandura's established four sources of self-efficacy: mastery

experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and emotional states, the proposed solutions offer a concrete framework for educators. Specifically, the strategic training of learning strategies equips students with the essential tools for success, thereby creating the conditions for authentic mastery experiences. Furthermore, the deliberate creation of scaffolded learning scenarios ensures that all students, regardless of their current proficiency level, can experience targeted successes, reinforcing their sense of competence. Finally, the mindful use of relatable peer and exemplar models provides powerful vicarious experiences that convince students of their own potential.

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