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## The role of writing and reading self-efficacy in first-year preservice EFL teachers' writing performance

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### Abstract

Reading and writing self-efficacy have been recognized as related to and predictors of writing performance (e.g. Prad-Sala & Redford, 2012; Shell, Murphy & Bruning, 1989). As reading academic texts and writing essays are two essential components of undergraduate programs, discovering and discussing self-efficacy beliefs in reading and writing become valuable. Social cognitive framework suggests that students donated with same skills may perform differently based on their perceived self-efficacy in target tasks (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Given the role of these two concepts, the current study aims to identify the relationship between perceived reading and writing self-efficacy beliefs in addition to their effect on writing performance with two surveys (Self-efficacy in writing [SEW], Self-efficacy in reading [SER], Prad-Sala & Redford, 2010). The first-year EFL preservice teachers of a state university in Turkey ( $N = 116$ ) completed SEW and SER surveys. Writing performances of the participants were evaluated by a short essay written for the final exam of Written Communication Course. The findings revealed that SEW was positively and significantly correlated with writing performance as well as SER. Also, hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that SER and SER significantly accounted for the variance in writing scores. Implications were discussed based on the results and the related literature.

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## 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the fundamental channels to transmit existing knowledge in most academic fields during undergraduate education. College composition or first-year writing classes of undergraduate programs represent the first step to academic writing. Resulting from this fact, getting professionalized in writing skill is quite substantial. At the same time, becoming competent in writing maybe a demanding process for first-year students and their trainers since it embodies various components (e.g. vocabulary, mechanics, citation procedures, genre variations etc.), and gaining this competency in this productive skill stands process and the test of time. One another aspect of writing in higher education is that self-efficacy beliefs may play role while performing this skill as verified by the literature (e.g. Meier, McCarthy & Schmeck, 1984; Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012; Shell et. al., 1989).

Self efficacy is a basal notion proposed by Bandura (1977) as a part of social-cognitive framework. One of the basic proposition of self-efficacy concept is that individuals with same abilities may do the required task distinctively because of their efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997). Also, the relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and the behavior exhibited has been found bidirectional: while self-efficacy beliefs influence individuals' behavior, their performance can affect their future efficacy beliefs, as well (Chapman & Tunmer, 2003; Williams & Williams, 2010, as cited in Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012).

As going into particulars, the idiosyncratic subtopic of self-efficacy that is called perceived self-efficacy can be defined as the belief in individuals' own potential to accomplish a specific task (Bandura, 1993). In other words, it indicates the belief in one's ability to manage something. For example, in higher education, this may be writing an essay or quoting from the target source etc. As stated above, a task such as writing an essay demands several competencies. That is a given fact that reading is possibly one of the most frequently referenced skills during the process of writing. For this reason, the current study elaborates both reading and writing self-efficacy beliefs in addition to their probable effects on and contributions to writing performance.

### 1.1. Literature review

In the present study, the concerned behavior is academic performance, specifically, writing performance of first-year university students. For this reason, the literature related to the association between reading self-efficacy, writing self-efficacy and writing performance of university students have been reviewed. The research indicates interrelationship between writing/reading self-efficacy and writing performance. For instance, Meier et. al. (1984) investigated this relationship via their 19-item measure of self-efficacy in writing. The undergraduate students explained their efficacy levels in carrying out basic (e.g. spelling) and more complex tasks (e.g. organization of ideas) two times: both at the starting and at the end of a 16 week semester. Respondents also wrote an essay in each time of these survey implementations which were utilized to decide their writing performance. According to regression analysis, writing self-efficacy explained 18% of the variance in writing performance in Phase I while that ratio value was not significant in Phase II. Due to the results in Phase II, the researchers discussed the measurement capacity of the instrument for the target variable. Following this, McCarthy, Meier & Rinderer (1985) replicated this study with undergraduates applying the same instrument and methodology. In that study, writing self-efficacy significantly supported writing performance in both different phases.

Shell et. al (1989) constructed two different writing and reading self-efficacy scales and implemented them to investigate relationship between reading/writing self-efficacy and writing performance for undergraduate students. The measure of writing self-efficacy consisted of two subscales: 1) the writing task which estimates self-efficacy level in communicative writing such as writing a letter, composing a will etc., 2) the writing skill which estimates self-efficacy level in structural prospects, for example, spelling words appropriately, organizing sentences etc. Writing performance was evaluated by a 20 minute essay. According to the results of regression analysis, writing skills explained 10% of the variance while the writing task subscale did not account for writing performance. In addition to self-efficacy in writing, the researchers also constructed a self-efficacy in reading scale with two subscales: 1) the reading task which determines self-efficacy level in doing communicative reading tasks such as reading a letter or a recipe, 2) reading skill which determines self-efficacy level in such skills as recognizing letters, utilizing former knowledge while comprehending new texts etc. Results demonstrated that self-efficacy in reading

accounted for 13% of the variance in writing score. Nevertheless, hierarchical regression analysis revealed that self-efficacy in reading had not explained any additional variance when writing self-efficacy was entered as the initial step of the hierarchical model. In the coming years, Pajares & Johnson (1994) implemented two writing subscales of Shell et al. (1989) to undergraduate preservice teachers and used 30 minutes essays as the reference of writing performance. This study confirmed the results of Shell et. al (1989) and revealed that self-efficacy in writing skills was associated with writing performance.

More recently, Prat-Sala & Redford (2010) developed two new scales: Self-efficacy in Reading (SER) and Self-efficacy in Writing (SEW). Using these two scales, scholars firstly investigated the interrelationships among self-efficacy beliefs, motivation orientations and approaches to studying of first-year undergraduate students. Results informed that high self-efficacy in reading and writing induced adopting a deep approach to studying. Also, students' approaches to studying changed based on their self-efficacy beliefs in the long run. Low efficacious students reduced in their deep approach and intensified in their surface approach while high-efficacious ones did not signify any change in their approaches. Two years after this study, Prat-Sala & Redford (2012) examined the relationship among three variables that were self-efficacy in reading, self-efficacy in writing and writing performance, using SER and SEW scales. Essays of first and second year undergraduates appointed as final assignment were collected for the decision of writing performance. As a result, perceived self-efficacy beliefs in reading and writing were found to be related to writing performance both for first (SEW,  $r=.382$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; SER,  $r=.304$ ,  $p=.003$ ) and second year undergraduates (SEW,  $r=.382$ ,  $p<0.001$ ; SER,  $r=.304$ ,  $p=.003$ ). Moreover, hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that SER (9.2% of the variance) and SEW (additional 5.4% of the variance) were predictive of writing performance for the first-year students as well as for the second-year undergraduates (SER= 8.6% of variance; SEW = additional 10.9 % of the variance). Chiefly, results of the prior research imply that self-efficacy beliefs in reading and self-efficacy beliefs in writing are partly responsible for and support writing performance both in unitary and mix-field analyses.

## *1.2. Current research*

The initial purpose of the present study is to identify first-year preservice English teachers' perceived self-efficacy beliefs in reading academic texts and writing essays in foreign language. Following this, the researcher aims to investigate whether these two task-specific self-efficacy beliefs affect the writing performance of preservice teachers or not. To that end, two main research questions have guided the study: RQ 1. How does self-efficacy belief in reading (SER) relate to self-efficacy beliefs in writing (SEW)?, RQ 2. How do self-efficacy beliefs in reading and writing relate and contribute to writing performance?.

## **2. Methodology**

### *2.1. Participants and research context*

A total of 116 (87 females and 29 males) first-year preservice EFL teachers participated in the current study. The participants were enrolling the Program in English Language Teaching at a state university in Turkey. The students who enrolled in these programs took a language proficiency exam and, if necessary, attended the Language Preparatory Program before starting their undergraduate programs. All students were required to attend some skill-based compulsory courses during their first semesters (i.e. Academic Reading, Written Communication, Contextual Grammar I, Oral Communication Skills I, and Listening Comprehension). The participants of the present study were taking two of these courses that were "Academic Reading" and "Written Communication".

In the Academic Reading Course, predetermined academic essays were examined throughout the lesson. The students were required to read assigned texts before coming to classroom. Then, in the classroom, some specific points such as the purpose, the content, and writers' points of view were discussed. Course evaluation included an in-class mid-term exam, weekly assignments, and in-class final exam. The exams were evaluated on the basis of

students' comprehension of the texts similar to the ones examined in the lessons. Evaluation of weekly assignments was done via portfolio assessment since students were required to answer the assigned questions of that week's text.

Written Communication course, on the other hand, started with paragraph writing and went on with essay writing. Firstly, students learnt and practiced writing thesis statement, essay outline in addition to introductory and concluding techniques. Then, they learnt how to write an opinion and comparison & contrast essays. After studying on them, they assigned their first drafts and got written and spoken feedback on them respectively. Course evaluation included a midterm exam, take-home assignments, and a final exam. For the in-class midterm exam, students wrote an outline, a paragraph and did some exercises such as finding topic sentence, thesis statement etc. In the final in-class exam, they were supposed to write an outline in addition to an opinion or comparison & contrast essay. They were free to choice between two genres and write about the optional prompts throughout 90 minutes.

## *2.2. Instruments*

Two instruments were used in this study. The first one, Self-efficacy in Reading (SER) scale, describes first-year preservice teachers' perceived self-efficacy in reading and understanding the content of academic texts, while the Self-efficacy in Writing (SEW) scale identifies their perceived self-efficacy beliefs in essay writing. There are twelve items in each Likert-type scale, and the subjects responded to items along 7 points from 1 (not well at all) to 7 (very well). Reading and writing self-efficacy scores were composed by calculating the mean of each twelve items of SER and SEW. Lastly, alpha coefficients were determined as .885 for SER and .928 for SEW in the current study. The rationale of using SER and SEW as measures of reading and writing self-efficacy is that these two scales can evaluate the key skills that undergraduates are supposed to accomplish while reading academic texts and writing essays better as compared to the ones designed for undergraduate students in the literature (i.e. Meier et. al., 1984; Shell et. al, 1989; Yavuz-Erkan & İflazoğlu-Saban, 2004).

## *2.3. Writing performance*

The writing performance measure was the in-class final exam of Written Communication course. The exam scores contributed 50% towards the overall grade of the course. Therefore, the essays were not produced for research purposes. During this in-class exam, students were supposed to write an opinion or comparison & contrast essay with its outline. They were free to choice between two genres and write about the optional prompts. However, they had maximum ninety minutes to complete their written work. Before this final exam, the students got feedback on their essays written in both genres, hence it was supposed that they could be clear about the particular features of these genres. All papers were evaluated and graded by the three experienced lecturers of this course. The lecturers had been delivering this course for years, thus they had much experience in scoring essays, as well. All the raters followed the same scoring criteria using analytic scoring method. Total scores might range from 0 to 100.

## *2.4. Procedure*

The participants were invited to respond to Self-efficacy in Reading and Writing scales at the end of fall semester (2012-2013 Academic Year). They firstly filled in the SER survey, and secondly responded to the SEW survey with two weeks interval. It has been supposed that this would give the first year undergraduates some opportunity to get experienced in reading and writing at university. Lastly, the participants were informed that their voluntarily participation in the research was valuable, and they were free to decline responding to the scales.

## **3. Results**

As for the analysis of the data, firstly, descriptive statistics were conducted and the mean scores across all items of reading and writing self-efficacy scales (SER and SEW) were computed. As a result, those mean scores and the writing scores provided the base for data analysis (see Table 1). Following this, the Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient was calculated for the two scales (SER and SEW), and a quite high degree of internal consistency were found for the two scales as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean scores and alpha coefficients of SER and SEW.

SER mean (SD)	SEW mean (SD)	SER	SEW
4.57 (.789)	4.41 (.893)	$\alpha = .885$	$\alpha = .928$

The next step was to conduct Pearson's  $r$  correlation analyses with the aim of examining the relationship between the self-efficacy in reading (SER) and self-efficacy in writing (SEW) scales. The findings revealed that those scales significantly and positively correlated with each other ( $r = .65$ ,  $n = 116$ ,  $p < .01$ ).

In an attempt to investigate whether self-efficacy in reading (SER) and in writing (SEW) were related to writing performance, and whether these beliefs contributed to writing scores or not, firstly, Pearson's correlations were conducted between self-efficacy scores and writing performance. The results indicated that SEW was positively and significantly correlated with writing performance ( $r = .351$ ,  $n = 116$ ,  $p < .01$ ) as well as SER ( $r = .31$ ,  $n = 116$ ,  $p < .05$ ) although self-efficacy in writing showed a little stronger relationship.

Table 2. Results of hierarchical regression analysis to predict writing performance.

	Independent Variable	B	SE B	$\beta$
Step 1	Self-efficacy in Reading (SER)	3.16	1.25	.23*
Step 2	Self-efficacy in Reading (SER)	0.06	1.59	.00
	Self-efficacy in Writing (SEW)	4.2	1.40	.35**

$R^2 = .053$  for Step 1;  $\Delta R^2 = .070$  for Step 2 ( $ps < .05$ ) \* $p < .05$ ; \*\* $p = .003$

As the last step, a hierarchical regression analysis was conducted with SER entered on the first step followed by SEW as independent variables and essay writing performance as the dependent variable. The results demonstrated that SER significantly accounted for 5.3% of the variance ( $F(1,114) = 6.435$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and SEW significantly accounted for an additional 7% of the variance ( $F(2,113) = 7.947$ ;  $p = .001$ ) in essay writing scores.

#### 4. Conclusion

The current research intended to investigate whether first-year EFL preservice teachers' self-efficacy beliefs in reading academic texts and writing essays (in English) were associated with their writing performance. As the results revealed, these two types of self-efficacy beliefs had significant and positive relationship with writing performance. This finding also corresponded to the previous studies in which same kind of relationship had been discovered between self-efficacy beliefs in reading and in writing, and writing performance (e.g. Pajares & Johnson, 1994; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012; Shell et al., 1989). Secondly, the results of regression analysis indicated that self-efficacy in reading and in writing were predictive of foreign language essay writing performance, and this outcome maintained the manifestation of prior investigations (e.g. Meier et al., 1984; Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012; Shell et al., 1989). Especially, the comparison of the present research to Prat-Sala & Redford's (2012) study is more worthwhile since it represents a replicated version of their study in term of the instruments used, the methodology applied and the main characteristics of the subjects participated (i.e. undergraduate students). The main difference was that the sample of the current study consisted first-year preservice English teachers while Prat-Sala & Redford (2012) had concentrated on first and second year undergraduate psychology students.

The writing performance in this study was determined based on two specific genres (i.e. opinion and comparison & contrast essays). As Hayes (2000) has emphasized, self-efficacies of writers are to be specific to writings tasks; in other words, writing self-efficacy in one genre (e.g. story writing) may not be generalized to the other (e.g. essay writing). For this reason, it should be emphasized that the contribution of self-efficacy beliefs in current study is restricted to a particular domain which is essay writing. This parallelism is one of the critical points under the dimensions of the current study, since the two scales also address academic writing and essay writing processes through a total of twenty-four items. The results also illustrated the prominent role of reading in writing

performance. Although writing self-efficacy beliefs accounted for more variance in writing performance in comparison with self-efficacy in reading, the indivisible unity of these two skills signalizes the need of highlighting critical reading and writing in university setting (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012). At the same time, the independent roles of self-efficacy beliefs in reading and writing may be confirmed clearly by conducting multicollinearity statistics as well.

Bandura (1997) provides some sources of self-efficacy in his scholarly writing one of which is behavior (e.g. performance in the target task). This means that behaviors of students can also affect their self-efficacy beliefs. In this study, the behavior refers to writing performance, and it can be used as a mirror to observe and assess the existing condition of self-efficacy level. For this study, better writing performance will probably eventuate in higher self-efficacy in the concerned areas that are reading academic texts and writing essays in foreign language. Thus, teacher trainers can be aware of this fact on the first hand, and make use of it for novice foreign language writers' learning process. One another concept that may be benefited from is self-regulation. Under dimensions of social-cognitive theory, self-regulation suggests that learners organize the "motivational, affective, cognitive and social determinants of their academic and intellectual output" (Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Bandura, 1994 as cited in Prat-Sala & Redford, 2012). Therefore, enhancing reading and writing self-efficacy may play a positive role in enhancing motivation and persistence in target writing task. The increase in these two types of self-efficacy may also contribute to some affective factors such as minimizing the amount of stress and anxiety. Lastly, enhancing self-efficacy in reading and in writing may result in higher attempts of objective setting related to foreign language writing, and especially in higher education, self-regulation would probably have a critical role in the management of all these factors mentioned above.

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