

2014

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Peter B. Swanson

Georgia State University, pswanson@gsu.edu

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Recommended Citation

Swanson, P. (2014). Confidence is essential for language teachers. *Contact*, 40(3), 34-39.

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CONFIDENCE IS ESSENTIAL FOR LANGUAGE TEACHERS

By Pete Swanson, Georgia State University

When asked why they chose teaching as a profession, many of the teacher candidates in our language teacher preparation program remarked that they want to have an impact on their students' lives. However, before they have the opportunity to influence positively the next generation, many leave the profession. In Canada approximately 30% of the teachers leave the profession, which is less than other developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom where teacher attrition rates skyrocket to almost 50% (Dolton & van der Klaauw, 1995; Fédération Canadienne des Enseignantes et des Enseignants, 2004; Stoel & Thant, 2000).

Results of a Canada-wide survey suggest that the shortage of French teachers can be explained by four main factors: task-related, individual, social, and socio-economic (Karsenti, Collin, Villeneuve, Dumouchel, & Roy, 2008). Task-related factors (e.g., classroom management issues and working conditions) are the most commonly cited reasons among teachers. Individual factors, which entail teachers' emotional and psychological states play a role, while social factors (e.g., teachers' lack of collaboration, poor relations with administrators) were commonly mentioned too. Last, but hardly least, socio-economic factors—of particular interest in today's global economy—were reported to affect a teacher's choice to remain in or to leave the profession all together.

Regardless of language taught (e.g., English, Chinese) or type of program (e.g., immersion, foreign language, second language), as language teachers, we share common goals and endure similar challenges. Thus, I have grouped them collectively in my research when studying language teachers in both Canada and the US. Over the course of several studies focusing on language teacher attrition, and having worked as a Spanish teacher in public schools, I've found that the shortage of language teachers can be explained in terms of natural attrition (i.e., retirement), increased student enrollments, legislative issues, and perceptual issues surrounding teaching as a profession (e.g., teaching is a dead-end job, low status). Regardless of how the factors are categorized, as a language teacher-educator, I have learned that such factors can be discouraging to in-service teachers who may be considering leaving the classroom as well as those considering becoming a language teacher. In fact, the highest rate of attrition is among novice language teachers: those in their first five years on the job (Swanson, 2010, 2012, 2014). These individuals tend to have few successes and this sense of failure fuels attrition. Thus, developing and nurturing a strong sense of efficacy is vital for teacher retention and overall teacher performance.

What Constitutes Teachers' Sense of Efficacy?

Bandura (2006) suggests that of the four sources of self-efficacy mastery experiences are the most powerful in increasing self-efficacy. Such experiences help us build a strong belief of their abilities whereas failures tend to undermine and to weaken our confidence. The perception that a teacher is mastering a task has been found to be much more influential in constructing a greater sense of efficacy than the other three sources of efficacy, which are vicarious experiences (i.e., observing another teacher's class), social persuasion, and physiological responses.

According to Bandura, we are self-organizing, self-regulating, self-reflecting, and proactive. We set goals, predict likely outcomes, regulate and monitor our actions, and then reflect on our personal efficacy. Self-efficacy affects our goals and behaviors, and it is impacted by environmental factors found in schools. Further, efficacy beliefs determine how we perceive obstacles and opportunities and affect choice of activities, how much effort we exert, and how long we will persist when confronted with obstacles. As language teachers, each proficient teaching performance helps to create new mastery experiences for us, which then serve as new information that forms our future efficacy beliefs. A stronger sense of teacher efficacy leads to increased effort and persistence, which leads to better performances later, which, in turn, leads to even stronger efficacy beliefs. On the contrary, a weaker sense of efficacy leads us to expend less effort and to give up more easily, which leads to poor teaching outcomes and, ultimately, can lead to quitting the profession.

What Research Can Tell Us about Our Sense of Efficacy

From a personal perspective, when I was teaching high school Spanish in Wyoming, my first couple of years were challenging to say the least. My sense of efficacy, my belief in my ability to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, in my abilities to teach grammar was strong, but I felt less confident in several areas like teaching about culture. Luckily, the German teacher in the next classroom quickly befriended me and offered assistance. After telling Kevin how I felt about my abilities, he invited me to sit in his classes during my prep hour and observe his class. In addition to periodically joining one of his classes, he suggested that I study abroad and begin my master's degree. So I did. After returning that first summer from Spain, I began taking classes. It was at that moment I could see a change in my practice and my attitude. My cultural instruction was stronger and I focused on Spanish culture that first year. The next year I studied in Costa Rica and continued to take classes. Again, I returned to work rejuvenated a much better instructor. During this time, Kevin got me involved in our state foreign language association. I learned even more about teaching and the networking with other language teachers quickly taught me that there were others struggling with different aspects of language teaching.

However, from a more scholarly perspective, recent research on language teachers suggests that teachers' sense of efficacy is positively related to a variety of outcomes such as working harder and persisting longer, even when students pose a challenge to teach, because teachers hold strong, positive beliefs about themselves and their students (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Additionally, they

- demonstrate greater enthusiasm for teaching
- demonstrate greater commitment
- employ more effective problem-solving strategies
- are more willing to implement innovations
- have improved classroom management strategies
- are less critical of students when they err
- are more likely to stay in teaching

Where language teachers are concerned, having a stronger sense of efficacy leads to improved teachers' coping strategies, classroom management abilities, embracing communicative language teaching, the teaching of intercultural competence, and longevity in the profession (Swanson, 2012, 2014). Overall, teachers who believe that they can affect student learning also persist longer and better when confronted with challenges. It's true in my case and many other people with whom I've worked would agree.

Interestingly, in addition to having benefits for teachers, a teacher's strong sense of efficacy has benefits for our students too. I found in a study of Spanish teachers that students of those teachers with a strong sense of efficacy in teaching Spanish outperform their counterparts on the National Spanish Exams. Using the Second/Foreign Language Teacher Efficacy Scale (Swanson, 2014), I surveyed Spanish teachers who administered the National Spanish Exams to their students and compared the students' scores on the exams for teachers who reported a high and a low sense of efficacy. Among the results, I reported that students of Spanish teachers with a strong sense of efficacy outscored their counterparts whose teachers reported a weaker sense of efficacy in the three areas measured by the scale: content knowledge, facilitation of instruction, and cultural instruction.

Novice language teachers, who tend to have fewer positive experiences in the classroom, are more likely than their veteran counterparts to quit teaching. In a large-scale study of second/foreign language teachers in Canada and the US, novice language teachers reported a lower sense of efficacy on every statement of the previously mentioned efficacy scale (see Figure 1).

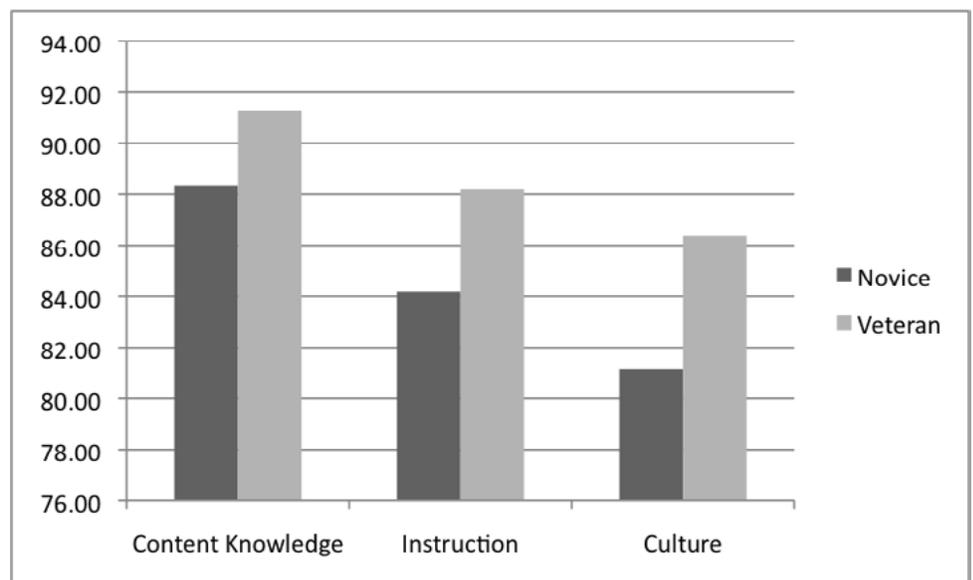


Figure 1. Differences in efficacy between novice and veteran language teachers.

Typically, language teachers tend to rate their confidence in the target language content area the highest of the three areas. Then, they feel moderately confident in their ability to deliver instruction (e.g., pedagogy, engaging students to learn). Finally, language teachers tend to perceive the least amount of efficacy in teaching about the target language culture. As Figure 1 shows, there are clear discrepancies between veteran and novice instructors.

How to Improve Our Sense of Efficacy in Teaching Languages

While all language teachers are susceptible to attrition, novices are particularly vulnerable as mentioned earlier. They tend to overestimate their abilities and competencies during teacher training programs and then experience a professional jolt when they realize that their earlier beliefs about their skills are not congruent with their current abilities. Of particular interest, it is at this time that they are optimistic about the level of impact they will have with our students. Tschannen-Moran and Woolfolk Hoy (2007) caution that such a realization may lead novices to recalibrate their idea of quality instruction and then lower their standards for learning as a mechanism of self-preservation in order to avoid a stressful self-assessment of failure. However, such setbacks may motivate novices to increase their knowledge about teaching and learning if the teacher can maintain a sufficient level of belief in the possibility of future successes.

Thus, there is much that can be done to build and sustain our confidence. Research suggests that efficacy is most malleable early in learning and that mastery experiences are the most powerful of the four sources fueling one's belief system. Teacher education course work and observation of master teachers are vital to constructing the foundation of a strong sense of efficacy. Instructors need to be in the classroom early in their coursework in order to begin building mastery experiences and learn from veterans modeling best practices. Simply getting a job with provisional certification and jumping into the classroom unprepared is not wise. Working side by side with a veteran mentor teacher improves our sense of efficacy. By watching a more proficient teacher, novice teachers can develop new ideas and add them to their educational toolbox. Additionally, collaboration is another avenue to pursue because by pooling pedagogical resources and knowledge, instructors can share the workload, develop materials together, and not feel so isolated, which is a common reason among those who have chosen to quit the profession.

I strongly recommend that instructors enroll in and complete graduate degree programs because they have been shown to be an important component when building and maintaining a strong sense of efficacy. My studies have confirmed such a belief and other researchers have found that teachers with advanced degrees specific to the subject area in which they teach are associated with higher student achievement. Many times during graduate programs, summer study abroad programs are available and it is highly advised

that language teachers study in the target-language culture in order to improve their talents linguistically and well as culturally.

Additionally, joining professional organizations has been shown to improve our confidence in teaching languages. Attending conferences such as the annual meeting of the TESL Ontario and/or the TESL Canada meeting every 18 months can provide all language teachers new ideas and opportunities for professional development that may not be available from local school districts struggling with budget cuts. Spending a few days immersed with other language teachers learning about new strategies, theories, and ideas promotes professional growth and well-being. Even as a veteran teacher-educator I feel completely rejuvenated upon returning from a professional conference and can't wait to go again the next year.

Acting in a proactive manner is critical because efficacy beliefs have serious implications for all teachers. If a teacher's perception about his or her performance is low, that individual is more likely to perceive potential problems as much bigger than they actually may be and develop negative attitudes that may lead to their leaving the field. Finally, I recommend that language teachers self-administer the Second/Foreign Language Teacher Efficacy Scale so they can critically determine areas of perceived strengths and areas for improvement in terms of self-efficacy (available from <http://pbswanson.edublogs.org/efficacy-scale/>). Then, these individuals can begin focusing on professional development in areas that they feel need improvement.

Career Satisfaction

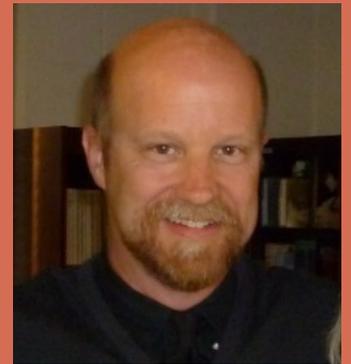
In summary, having a strong sense of efficacy enhances our accomplishments and personal well-being. Highly confident language teachers view difficult tasks as challenges to be overcome rather than as threats. Additionally, they set goals and attain them so that they can have the impact they dreamed of when they first set out to teach a language. Quitting the profession when confronted with difficulties is not the answer. We can have the impact we want to have. Language teaching is an awesome profession and the time is here to rise above circumstances and be proactive so that we can enjoy working with our next generation, a group that will impact our lives sooner than we may care to think.

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Author Bio



Dr. Pete Swanson is the Director of the Foreign Language Teacher Educator program at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. He teaches classes in methods, technology integration, and foundations of second language learning. His research focuses on the characteristics of effective language teachers and integrating technology into instruction.