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Gender and Optimism as Predictors of Novice ESOL Teaching Performance

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Gender and Optimism as Predictors of Novice ESOL Teaching Performance

Abstract

Both current and past research examining novice ESOL teachers has focused on issues such as educational background and classroom demographics (Yeo et al., 2008), but little research has focused on potential variables that influences perceived teaching performance. Consequently, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship between gender, optimism, and perceived teaching performance amongst novice ESOL teachers. Graduates from two hybrid TESOL graduate programs (N=47) were sampled and surveyed. Optimism significantly predicted perceived teaching performance, $t(43) = 3.17, p = .003$ and there was an marginal association between gender and perceived teaching performance, $t(43) = -1.92, p = .06$. Further analyses indicated that the mean ratings of teaching performance were significantly different between men and women, $F(1, 45) = 5.12, p = .03$. In sum, our results suggest that gender and optimism are factors in perceptions of teacher efficacy amongst novice ESOL teachers. The findings of this study with optimism, gender, and teaching performance not only add empirical data for this group, but also provides a platform to further examine this unique population.

Keywords

TESOL, ESOL, Novice, Performance, Optimism, Gender

Cover Page Footnote

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Both current and past research examining novice ESOL teachers has focused on issues such as educational background and classroom demographics (Yeo et al., 2008), but little research has focused on potential variables that influences perceived teaching performance. Consequently, the aim of this study is to examine the relationship between gender, optimism, and perceived teaching performance amongst novice ESOL teachers. Graduates from two hybrid TESOL graduate programs (N=47) were sampled and surveyed. Optimism significantly predicted perceived teaching performance, $t(43) = 3.17, p = .003$ and there was an marginal association between gender and perceived teaching performance, $t(43) = -1.92, p = .06$. Further analyses indicated that the mean ratings of teaching performance were significantly different between men and women, $F(1, 45) = 5.12, p = .03$. In sum, our results suggest that gender and optimism are factors in perceptions of teacher efficacy amongst novice ESOL teachers. The findings of this study with optimism, gender, and teaching performance not only add empirical data for this group, but also provides a platform to further examine this unique population.

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Teachers face a number of trials in and out of the classroom and these challenges can be particularly difficult for new teachers. Consequently, researchers have focused on understanding the perceptions of novice teachers and what might assist with their teaching success (Brannan & Bleistein, 2012; Farrell, 2003; 2006). More specifically, researchers have examined the association between personality traits, specifically optimism, teaching efficacy, and success (Poraj, 2010; Tait, 2008). While research has found significant positive correlations between optimism and self-efficacy in undergraduate teachers (Karademas, Kafetsios, & Sideridis, 2007), there has been little research on optimism and how novice teachers perceive their teaching performance. Even less research has been done with novice teachers who teach English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Thus, this study focused on the relationship between optimism and perceived teaching success within a novice TESOL population; additionally, gender was also examined.

English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) Teachers

ESOL teachers work with students from a variety of linguistic and cultural backgrounds. With that in mind,

these teachers need to be able to negotiate cultural expectations and educational demands. Farrell's (2009) work among English teachers in Singapore revealed that novice teachers are strongly influenced by the culture of schooling that they were socialized into as well as the teacher education program from which they have recently graduated. Novice teachers must learn to navigate the dissonance and confusion that arise when their nascent philosophies of pedagogy and the institutional context where they are employed conflict (Farrell, 2007). As novice teachers begin their teaching careers, they must acquire and implement strategies (e.g., teacher-centered vs. student-centered) that are acceptable in their schools (Farrell, 2006; 2007). While existing research explores the external contributions to novice ESOL teachers' performance, little is known about the personal characteristics that could contribute to it.

Optimism and Teaching Performance

The personality trait of optimism is generally defined as the mental attitude in which an individual views life from a positive perspective. More specifically, it is the overall expectation that things in life will be good, and that generally bad events will have good outcomes.

Additionally, the trait of optimism has been shown to have a positive effect on performance (Karademas, 2006; Karademas et al., 2007; Kluemper, Little, & DeGroot, 2009; Nonis & Wright, 2003; Scheir & Carver, 1987). Research has demonstrated a positive association between performance and positive personality traits; in particular, the association between teachers and optimism (Duckworth, Quinn & Seligman, 2009). In addition, further research has revealed that teachers who were more optimistic were significantly more likely to have better perceived performance (Bandura, 1977; 1993; Duckworth et al. 2009; Karademas, 2006; Karademas et al., 2007; Platsidou, 2010; Poraj, 2010; Yeo, Ang, Chong, Huan, & Quek 2008) which, in turn, enhanced job retention (Boyer, 2006; Poraj, 2010). Consequently, previous research has suggested that positive personality traits may assist teachers in coping with the stressors of their new careers (Otero-Lopez, Bolano, Marino & Pol, 2010).

According to Bandura (1977; 1993), it is essential that an individual have a strong belief that they are capable of achieving their goals or getting through stressful situations successfully; this outlook will increase satisfaction and optimism. Consistent with this notion, when a person is faced with a difficult task, those with high levels of optimism are more likely to believe that they have the necessary abilities to complete the task and, if they fail, they use their failure as a learning experience. This ability is especially important for novice ESOL teachers who are facing new situations and cross-cultural encounters in their work environment. According to Farrell (2006), many ESOL teachers have not been adequately prepared for their first teaching experience; more specifically, novice ESOL teachers often feel isolated from other teachers and struggle with feelings of inadequacy or being overwhelmed (Farrell, 2003; 2007). Farrell (2006) argued that new ESOL teachers frequently encounter an enormous learning curve that often includes understanding the new environment they are in and coping with challenges to the strategies and theories they have learned in their teacher education programs or in other arenas. If teachers have lower levels of optimism, the added stressors could lead to teachers experiencing burnout (Otero-Lopez et al., 2010; Platsidou, 2010) and, potentially, lower perceived performance. According to Farrell (2006), many ESOL teachers have not been adequately prepared for their first teaching experience; thus, it is reasonable to suggest that those with higher levels of optimism will likely fair better in those new, unique situations than those with lower levels of optimism.

Gender and Teaching Performance

Performance can also, potentially, be affected by gender. Research conducted by Lenney (1977)

demonstrated that low self-confidence in women predicts worse performance. This was especially relevant in relation to the type of task being performed, absence of clear feedback, and lack of prominent social cues. Moreover, Nieva and Gutek (1980) discussed that men have been predicted to perform better overall. However, in relation to teaching, some studies argue that no differences exist between genders (Kalyani, Panchanatham, & Parimala, 2009); while others demonstrate that women perform better (Boyer, 2006). Consistent with this notion, Boyer (2006) examined the relationship between positive outlooks and explanatory style and found a positive relationship between reappraisals of stressors and higher performance in novice, female elementary teachers. These results are possibly due to the gender stereotype existing in the teaching profession (Rosenblatt, Talmud, & Ruvio, 1999).

In this field, it is reasonable to suggest that teachers must be able to adapt and handle both success and failure well. Support from mentors, for females, can often lead to them being more optimistic which, in turn, may result in better performance (Boyer, 2006). But do differences in self-perceived performance really exist? According to Shore and Thornton (1986), there are no differences between males and females when asked to rate their own work performance. However, Rosenblatt et al. (1999) posed that female teachers, due to the field of teaching being thought of more as a female profession, had higher levels of self-perceived performance. With these mixed results, it is evident that more research is needed in gendered research, especially among ESOL teachers.

Present Study

Past research has associated optimism with better performance in other teaching populations (Bandura, 1977; 1993; Boyer, 2006; Duckworth et al., 2009; Karademas, 2006; Karademas et al., 2007; Otero-Lopez et al., 2010; Platsidou, 2010; Poraj, 2010; Yeo et al., 2008), but the influence of gender remains an area of conflicting research with females either performing at the same level or higher than their male coworkers (Boyer, 2006; Kalyani et al., 2009; Rosenblatt et al., 1999). Furthermore, it is important to note that these associations have not been examined in novice ESOL teachers. To further examine these associations, this study examined the relationship between optimism and gender on teaching performance in a novice teachers of ESOL sample.

Method

Participants were recent graduates (3 > years out of the program) of one of two United States-based, hybrid Masters-level TESOL programs. The programs consisted

of an online distance component and face-to-face class time. This allowed the participants to engage with others in the intensive classroom setting as well as work around the globe and apply their knowledge and education. A positive outcome of these types of programs is that they allow the students to finish their Masters degrees while living in a variety of geographic locations.

Participants

Sixty-seven participants were invited to participate in this study via email solicitation. Of those, 47 agreed to participate. Fifty-five percent of the sample were female and most were single or had never been married (51%). Forty-seven percent were married and 2% were living with a partner. Furthermore, most participants had children, and most were from the United States (60%). As for racial diversity, 86% were White/Caucasian. Additionally, 83% reported being employed with 40% teaching in the United States, 36% teaching in China, 4% in Mongolia as well as Korea. Two-percent of our sample taught in Vietnam, 2% in Honduras, 2% in Australia, 2% in Mongolia, 2% in Kazakhstan and 2% in Turkey. Finally, most individuals in this study reported teaching adults with 60% at universities and 18% teaching at an adult ESL program.

Procedure

Potential participants were recruited via email solicitation. Willing participants were directed to click a link to a secure survey page. In the survey, the first page included the informed consent and details about the study. Participants were then asked to fill out a demographics survey including gender, marital status, number of children, race, and teaching placement, and the surveys below and redirected to a "Thank You" page when finished with the study.

Measures

Optimism. Optimism was measured using the Life Orientation Scale (LOT; Scheier, Carver & Bridges, 1994). The participants were asked to select whether they agree or disagree with ten statements. The purpose of the ten statements was to see how pessimistic or optimistic the participant feels. The scale examines the potential difference between affirmation of optimism and disaffirmation of pessimism. An example statement included in this scale was "In uncertain times, I usually expect the best." The participants were then asked to rate the degree to which they agreed with the statement using 1 = I disagree a lot to 6 = I agree a lot. Those scoring higher showed higher levels of optimism. In this sample, the Life Orientation Scale had an internal consistency of $\alpha = .73$.

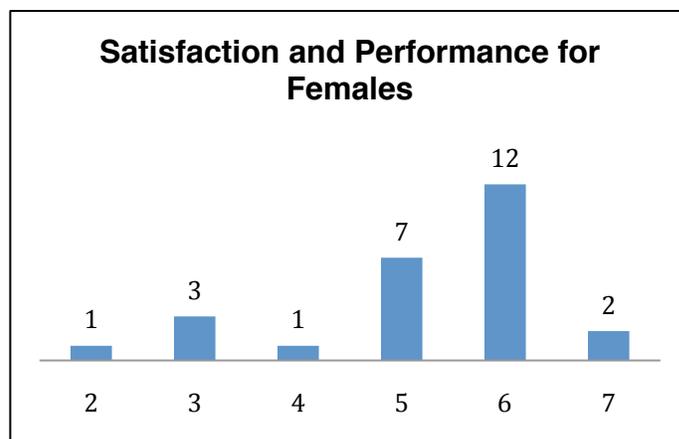
Satisfaction with Teaching Performance. Satisfaction with teaching performance was measured with a single question asking, "How satisfied are you with your teaching performance?" and rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale from 1-Extremely Dissatisfied to 7-Extremely Satisfied. Those with higher scores were more satisfied with their teaching performance.

Results

Descriptive Statistics and Correlations

The overall average for teaching performance was 5.53 (SD = 1.06), yet when examining gender, results revealed that men had an average mean rating of 5.90 (SD = .54) on perceived teaching performance and women had an average rating of 5.23 (SD = 1.27). Of note, there was not much variability for men compared to women; more specifically the range of average ratings was 5-7 for men (see Figure 1) and 2-7 for women (see Figure 2). This suggests that all the men in this study felt satisfied to some degree with their teaching performance while a number of women (20%) reported being neutral or dissatisfied with their teaching performance.

Figure 1 Distribution for Perceived Teaching Performance for Women



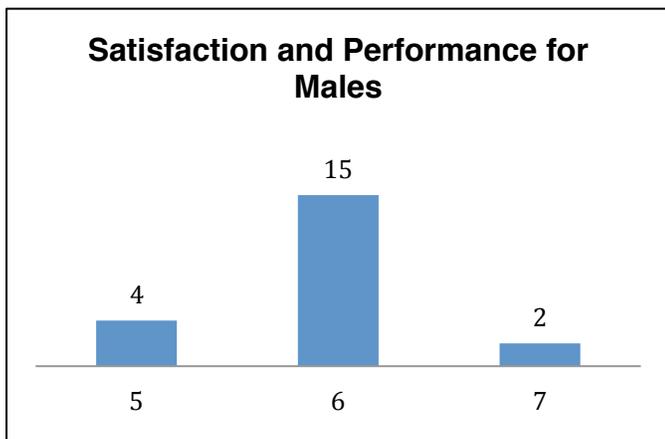
The mean for the overall optimism measure was 3.87 (SD = .76). Further analyses suggest that men had an average optimism level of 4.04 (SD = .77) and women had a 3.74 (SD = .74). Interestingly, the range was the same for both groups, 2-5.

In addition, a bivariate correlation analyses was conducted to examine the relationship between the predictor and outcome variables (see Table 1).

Results revealed that there was a positive association between optimism and teaching performance, $r = .47$, p

=.001. In addition, gender was significantly associated with perceived teaching performance, $r = -.32$, $p = .03$ (men were coded as -1 and women were coded as 1). These results demonstrate that higher levels of optimism, and being male, correlate with higher levels of self-perceived teaching performance.

Figure 2 Distribution for Perceived Teaching Performance for Men



Optimism and Gender Predicting Teaching Performance

A hierarchical linear regression was conducted to examine the relationship between optimism and gender on perceived teaching performance. Predictor variables were entered simultaneously. Results demonstrated that optimism significantly predicted perceived teaching performance, $\beta = .41$, $p = .003$; in other words, those with higher levels of optimism have significantly higher levels of perceived teaching performance compared to those with lower levels of optimism.

Results also indicated that there was a marginal association between gender and perceived teaching performance, $\beta = -1.37$, $p = .06$. It is possible that the small

sample size influenced these results. Interestingly, the interaction between gender* optimism was not significant, $\beta = 1.17$, $p = .09$. In sum, these results suggest that gender had a marginal influence on perceived teaching performance, but optimism significantly predicted higher levels of teaching performance.

Discussion

The current study provided evidence that optimism and gender significantly predict how satisfied novice ESOL teachers are with their teaching performance. Results suggest that gender and optimism levels, specifically lower levels of optimism, have a significant impact on how an individual perceives their teaching performance. These findings further support the work by Nonis and Wright (2003) who found that those who are more optimistic perform better and are more satisfied with their performance than those who are less optimistic (Karademas et al., 2007).

These results suggest that optimism could lead to higher ratings of perceived teaching performance. This could be fostered by using approach coping and problem-focused coping strategies (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Brissette, Scheier, & Carver, 2002; Nes & Segerstrom, 2006), which focus on addressing and solving the problem at hand instead of trying to eliminate the negative emotions that coincide with the problem (Coyne, Aldwin, & Lazarus, 1981; Scheier, Weintraub, & Carver, 1986; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). This would allow the teachers to handle new stressors in a healthy manner such as reappraising negative situations and drawing on socially supportive resources (Kalyani et al., 2009; Folkman & Lazarus, 1980). Consequently, their self-perceived performance should increase.

Furthermore, previous studies also suggest that mentorship for these teachers could create more optimism (Boyer, 2006). By engaging in a mentorship with a more experienced teacher, the novice teacher could gain insight

Table 1. Correlations of Gender, Performance, and Optimism

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Teaching performance satisfaction	5.53	1.06	1		
2. Optimism	3.87	.76	.47**	1	
3. Gender	.11	1.01	-.32*	-.19	1

Gender: females = 1, Males = -1; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

on their own explanatory style and receive encouragement for their future success. Mentors can also provide an emotional support to novice teachers who are struggling to cope with their new job. Brannan and Bleisten (2012) found that for novice ESOL teachers, mentors played a role in their perceived teaching efficacy. More specifically, when novice ESOL teachers were asked, they reported that they wanted and needed mentors to support them and when they obtained that support they felt better about their abilities to teach. It is likely that this support may buffer the teachers from negative events and interactions; thus, resulting in a more optimistic point of view for the novice teachers.

Finally, another way that mentors can be a useful tool for novice ESOL teachers is by allowing them to better understand the difficulties of their career and expand themselves into improved teachers (Aron & Aron, 2010). Overall, mentors can be a valuable resource for novice ESOL teachers to use to cope with the new challenges they may be facing.

This study also brings attention to the possible gender discrepancies in perceived performance. While this study found marginal associations, it is likely that novice female ESOL teachers who have lower levels of optimism may view their own performance as lower when compared to their male counterparts. This contradicts previous research that states women have higher self-perceived teaching performance than men (Boyer, 2006; Rosenblatt & Tlamud, 1999). Based off of the research by Boyer (2006), it can be concluded that women with less optimism have negative explanatory styles which may hinder the way they perceive their teaching performance. Another explanation could be that there are possible cultural barriers that women may have to address that men may not. For example, those teaching in Arab countries may have to balance a fine line between their own culture and the religious culture they are teaching in. Their religion may prohibit men and women from interacting in a level that is acceptable in other environments. This could place heavy burdens on female teachers who feel that they are not reaching their male students and, thus, performing poorly (Khuwailah, 2000).

Limitations and Further Research

Although this study utilized a small sample, the research provides information on the possibility of optimism improving novice ESOL teachers' perceived teaching performance. There is a possible interaction between optimism and perceived performance but due to limited statistical power, none was found. A larger sample size would offer diversity, statistical power, and opportunities to examine more ESOL programs. Broader diversity could assist in pinpointing whether culture or

learning are interacting with optimism and perceived performance within gender.

Future research would benefit from examining multiple programs instead of limiting the research to only two. Examining graduate students from different programs would provide clarification if it is the programs that are fostering these traits and characteristics for these teachers. In addition, examining more programs could better allow the results to be more generalized. In other words, it would shed light on whether these findings would apply across all the novice ESOL teachers. With that said, these results should be used with caution; we are not attempting to generalize all novice teachers but only the teachers in our sample.

Participants in Masters of TESOL programs may also benefit from thought and perception restructuring programs that focus on understanding personal strengths and resilience. Also helpful to the novice ESOL teachers would be learning to combat negative self-talk by challenging it and changing to more positive self-talk. This, in turn, would facilitate an increase in a person's optimism (Liossis, Sochet, Millear, & Biggs, 2009); particularly as some teachers are dealing with the stress of starting a new career in a foreign country.

This study also provided more support for the need of further research on the effect of gender on performance. Gender was found to correlate with performance, where males were more satisfied with their performance than females. This is contrary to the results of Shore and Thornton (1986) where no gender differences were found and with Boyer (2006) and Rosenblatt and Talmud (1999) who claimed that females were more satisfied. One reason for this could possibly be due to men feeling more comfortable in different cultural settings than women. Future studies should focus on discovering why novice male ESOL educators feel like they perform better in the classroom, as well as interventions that focus on improving optimism, and whether or not these interventions improve teaching performance.

Using empirical methods, this research study is a contribution to the understanding of a very special group of teachers. While interest in this unique group of teachers has been growing, there are still many areas to explore. For the purpose of this study, the focus was solely on how specific qualities might assist or interfere with teaching performance. This exploratory study also serves as a platform for future research studies in that it has found areas that need more examination, and brings to light the importance of examining the influence of personality traits of novice ESOL teachers when probing important outcomes.

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