



The Relationship between Tertiary Level EFL Teachers' Self-Efficacy Perceptions and Their Level of Linguistic Proficiency

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Abstract

Teacher self-efficacy has been identified as an important characteristic of teachers that can positively influence both teacher and student outcomes. The relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their linguistic proficiency, however, is yet to be investigated. The present study was an attempt to examine the rather under-researched issue of teachers' level of linguistic competence in their efficacy perceptions. For this purpose, 50 teachers from different universities in Iran with varying demographic characteristics took part in the study. Respondents were asked to provide answers to the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES) and the perceived linguistic proficiency self-rating. The results of statistical analysis using Spearman correlation and Regression analysis demonstrated a significant relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and their level of proficiency. The results of regression, too, confirmed the predictability of the level of the proficiency of the self-efficacy beliefs of teachers in their classroom practices. The findings are discussed in relation to previous research and implications are provided for future investigations.

Keywords: Teacher Self-Efficacy, Linguistic Proficiency, Tertiary Education, EFL Teachers, and Linguistic Competence

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Introduction

The issue of teacher quality has been considered as an imminent topic of concern for a long time for those in charge of ensuring the best for educational systems. One important attribute of effective teaching that can consistently measure teachers' future success in the classroom is teachers' beliefs in their abilities to affect student performance that has been recognized as a powerful and consistent predictor of behavior (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998). In other words, if a teacher has credence in dealing with his/her classroom and performing purposeful lessons, s/he will be more likely to do just that. In light of this, educational institutions, in general and teacher education programs in particular, need to take into account the factors associated with enhanced levels of self-efficacy in order to produce the most competent, skilled, and innovative teachers.

Recently, a considerable number of studies have been allocated to understanding the beliefs of teachers with the expectation of improving the conditions of teacher preparation and teaching performance. Studies correlate the effects of teacher self-efficacy on student outcome, teachers' competence and instructional methods, and teachers' desire to try numerous materials and enthusiasm for teaching (Ashton & Webb, 1986; Woolfolk & Hoy, 1990; Ross, 1992). There has also been a growing interest in EFL context among local researchers who have contributed to the understanding of the role of self-efficacy in affecting teachers' behavior and students' outcome over the past few years (Akbari & Moradkhani, 2010; Tajeddin & Khodaverdi, 2010). Accordingly, instructional self-efficacy can influence the teacher's attempt, goals, and perseverance with learners (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Based on this approach, in order for learners to learn effectively, teachers need to have belief in their own competence to bring about appropriate results. In terms of linguistic competence, several studies have illuminated that nonnative teachers' language capabilities potentially impact their professional self-efficacy beliefs, their professional status as teachers, and their pedagogical processes (e.g., Brinton, 2004; Mahboob, 2010). The native-speaker norm in English Language Teaching (ELT) poses challenges to even the most capable teachers in maintaining their integrity as English teachers (Llurda, 2005; Braine, 2010). In spite of the significance of this issue in teacher development, there have been very few studies to look into the role that teachers' level of proficiency play in either shaping or hindering their self-efficacy perceptions. The present study was carried out in order to shed light on this rather under-researched area.

Self-efficacy

The concept of self-efficacy was initially proposed by Albert Bandura (1977) in his article, "Self-efficacy: Toward a Unifying Theory of Behavioral Change" within the framework of his social learning theory (SLT) which has a history in social and

biological psychology, dating back to the late 1800s. Sharing its central premise with behaviorist psychology that human action is a response to environmental stimuli, the SLT attempts to place an emphasis on cognitive variables such as individual internal thought to examine the human behaviors that behaviorism and other dominant theories of the day had traditionally ignored (Pajares & Schunk, 2001). While behaviorists believe in the existence of a straightforward and unilateral relationship between stimulus and response, representing human behavior as a simple reaction to external stimuli and guided by one-sided determinism, Bandura's SLT asserts that there is a mediator (human cognition) between stimulus and response, situating person's control over behavioral responses to stimuli. Further, his theory focuses on how individuals develop self-perception of their capabilities that results in the goals they pursue and the control they exert over their environment. In social cognitive theory, in other words, humans are characterized in terms of five basic and distinctive capabilities which include symbolization, vicarious capabilities, forethought capabilities, as well as self-regulatory and self-reflective abilities (Bandura, 1977, 1989). These capabilities provide individuals with the cognitive abilities to determine behavior.

Self-efficacy, when applied to teaching context, has traditionally been defined as teachers' perception of their own capabilities to influence students' achievement (Tshannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy & Hoy, 1998). It has been identified as an important characteristic of teachers that can positively influence both teacher and student outcomes. Albert Bandura (1997), well known for his work on various types of efficacy, proposes that "the task of establishing learning environments conducive to the development of cognitive competencies in students relies heavily upon the talents and self-efficacy beliefs of teachers" (p. 240).

Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) is a construct with a simple definition but significant impact. It is a type of self-perception specific to the roles and responsibilities of a teacher, including teaching subject specific content, classroom management, and students learning, especially with difficult and unmotivated cases (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). More consistent with Bandura's (1977, 1997) theory of self-efficacy, teacher efficacy is also often divided into outcome expectancies and efficacy expectancies (Enochs, Riggs, & Ellis, 1993). Outcome expectancies is about the teachers' beliefs about the influence that particular teaching activities and functions have on learners, and efficacy expectancies are teachers' beliefs about their own ability to execute specific teaching actions. Bandura's social cognitive theory as well as its self-efficacy construct served as a basis for the works that followed by a group of other researchers such as Ashton et al. (1984), Gibson and Dembo (1984), and other researchers (as cited in Fives, 2003).

A third major dimension of teaching efficacy which has been defined as the belief shared across teachers in a school regarding the school's capabilities to impact student achievement and motivation is collective teacher efficacy (Goddard, Hoy &

Woolfolk Hoy, 2004). Collective efficacy helps us understand how working collaboratively with others can enhance a teacher's efficacy. Sharing ideas for teaching as a group can enable teachers to learn from each other and promote their cognitive development. Teachers' sense of efficacy can potentially influence both the kind of environment that they create as well as the various instructional practices introduced in the classroom (Bandura, 1993). Furthermore, teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy are confident that even the most difficult students can be reached if they exert extra effort; teachers with lower self-efficacy, however, feel disturbed and anxious when they are to deal with challenging and unmotivated learners (Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Sadeghi & Khezrlou, 2014, 2016).

Integrated Model of Teacher Self-efficacy

With the desire of clarifying conceptual obscurity around teacher efficacy, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) proposed an integrated model (Figure 1) which unites the two conceptual strands of research on teacher efficacy, briefly mentioned before, with new dimensions in the context and consideration of teacher tasks. In this model, their work led them to further define teaching efficacy as a teacher's beliefs in his or her capabilities to successfully perform a specific teaching task in a specific situation.

The integrated model postulates that cognitive processes strongly influence how teachers attend to and interpret the information they receive through the four sources of self-efficacy described by Bandura (1997): mastery experiences, physiological and emotional arousal, vicarious experience, and social persuasion. Further, it posits that how teachers view these sources of information mainly depends upon the types of attribution they make about their performances. However, teachers' sense of efficacy is context specific and change across different settings and tasks, and this should be considered while making efficacy judgment (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998).

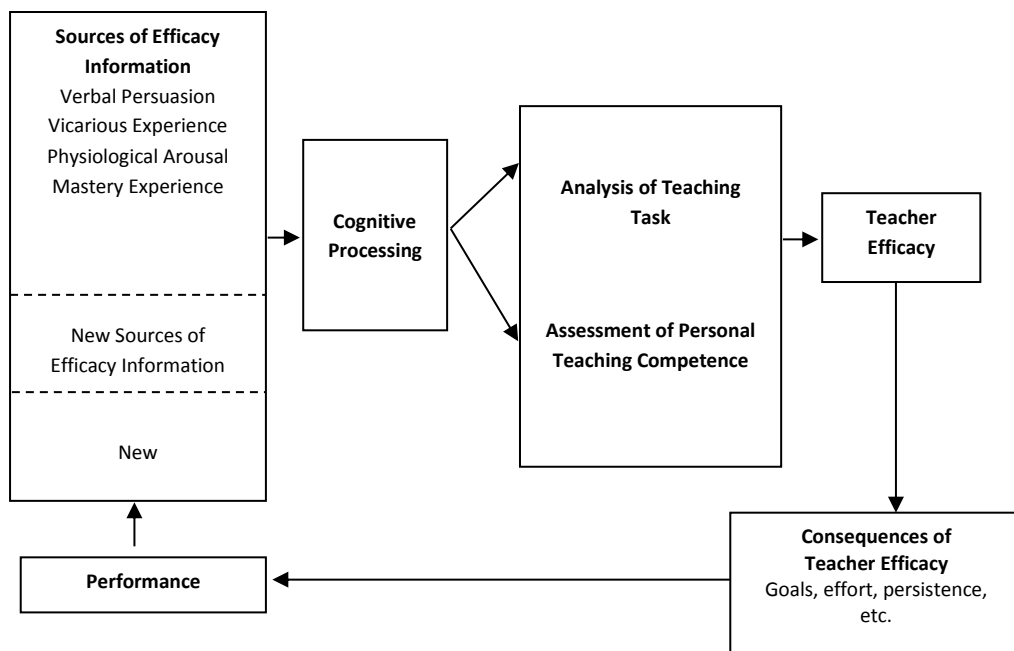


Figure 1. The cyclical nature of teacher efficacy from teacher efficacy: its meaning and measure by Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998, p. 228.

This model pointed out a very important feature of teacher efficacy; its cyclical nature which significantly influence teachers' perceptions of their ability to achieve future outcomes. Teachers' perception of their performance creates a new mastery experience that provides new information which contributes to their analysis of the teaching task and assessment of their teaching competence. In analyzing the teaching task and its context, the relative significance of factors that make teaching difficult or act as constraints is gauged against an assessment of external resources available that facilitate students' learning. In assessing personal teaching competence, the teachers evaluate personal capabilities such as abilities, cognition, strategies, or individual characteristics in terms of their personal weaknesses in that specific teaching context. Therefore, the combination of these two components results in judgments about teacher self-efficacy which in turn influences consequences such as how much effort teachers will expand to teach and cope with students' difficulties, or how persistent teachers are in the teaching career. Over time, perceptions of competency stabilize into a set of past and future efficacy beliefs. For the purpose of this study, teacher self-efficacy was situated within the framework of the integrated model of teacher self-efficacy developed by Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998).

Empirical Research on Teachers' Efficacy and Language Proficiency

As mentioned before, there has been very restricted number of studies on the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy perceptions and their level of proficiency. As far as we know, there exists four studies examining this relationship (Chacon, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Yilmaz, 2011; Choi & Lee, 2016). These studies looked into the relationship between the sub-scales of self-efficacy and components of English language proficiency, showing varying results for each of the correlations. In Chacon's (2005) study, for instance, the self-efficacy of 104 middle-school teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) could establish a significant correlation with all language proficiency elements such as speaking, listening, reading, and writing. In opposition to Chacon's study, the research by Eslami and Fatahi (2008) revealed a non-significant correlation among 40 Iranian high-school EFL teachers. The same result was obtained by Yilmaz (2011) reporting a non-significant relationship among 54 primary- and secondary-school EFL teachers in Turkey.

In addition to the above line of research, some studies regarded L2 proficiency as one sub-category of teachers' efficacy beliefs. For instance, in a study of Korean EFL nonnative teachers' professional identities, Hiver (2013) described teachers' opinions about their own overall English proficiency as "language self-efficacy." This study was not conducted in an ELT context, but in other studies of L2 teachers in Canada and the United States, Swanson (2012) provided the similar definition of target language knowledge as a feature of teachers' self-efficacy, and concluded that this language efficacy was shaped differently from other teaching efficacy beliefs. In spite of this definition, the teacher development literature about teachers' self-efficacy beliefs highlights the fact that the notion of efficacy needs to encompass the efficacy beliefs about particular instructional capabilities and excludes subject knowledge (Dellinger, Bobbett, Olivier, & Ellett, 2008; Bandura, 2006). Furthermore, in elaborating the L2 teachers' professional capabilities, Pasternak and Bailey's (2004) theoretical model specified language proficiency and pedagogical competence as two major but autonomous teacher characteristics. Consequently, in the present study, in line with the definition of self-efficacy in the wider established literature, language proficiency and self-efficacy were considered as independent variables.

This study aimed to determine if any statistically significant relationship existed between Iranian teachers' sense of efficacy and their language proficiency levels. To this end, the following research question was proposed:

1. Is there any statistically significant relationship between tertiary level L2 teachers' perceived sense of efficacy and their level of proficiency?

Method

Participants

Data were collected from 50 English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers employed in different universities throughout Iran. Most participants were females (81.6%) and they ranged in age from 24 to 59, with an average age of 40 years. All of the teachers taught English courses at the university level including both state (59%) and private (41%) ones. A few teachers (2.3%) taught a mixture of university and language school. Teachers instructed classes across the curriculum, consisting of both mandatory and elective courses, with an average class size of 26 learners. The majority of teachers earned either a Doctorate (41.3%) or Masters (35.6%) degrees, with a few earning Bachelors (.4%). A limited percentage of teachers stated that they registered in or that they were taking some Doctorate (22.3%) level classes. Years of teaching experience varied from one to 42, with a mean of 21.5 years.

Instruments

The Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES) (Gibson & Dembo, 1984)

The Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES) (Gibson & Dembo, 1984) was utilized to collect quantitative data about instructors' level of self-efficacy (see Appendix A). This questionnaire measures teachers' perceptions of both their personal and general self-efficacies. Personal efficacy evaluates teachers' conceptions and views about their capacities to assist challenging learners from less supportive environments to achieve high and acceptable academic results. The general efficacy, on the other hand, refers to the teachers' beliefs about their teaching ability to counteract the negative and unwanted impacts on learners' background. This is a 16-item form of Gibson and Dembo's Teacher Efficacy Scale (1984) that was reduced from 30 items since they could reach an appropriate reliability index of 0.79 employing only 16 items. A principal component factor analysis of the original questionnaire generated a 16-item scale with two main factors of personal teaching efficacy (PTE = nine items) and general teaching efficacy (GTE = seven items). The items of TES were measured on a six-point Likert-type scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (6).

It should also be noted that in the present study, in order to investigate whether any changes were required in the survey, and that all of the items in the questionnaire were clear enough for the participants to understand, the questionnaire was piloted with ten participants similar to those of actual study and the Cronbach's alpha results assured a satisfying reliability index ($\alpha = .88$).

English Language Proficiency

Based on Butler's (2004) study, the teachers in the present study were asked to rate their levels of English proficiency coupled with the least levels of English proficiency that they deemed essential for tertiary education level (Appendix B). The gap between the present and minimum levels could reflect the relative nature of self-perceptions about language proficiency due to the fact that teachers' perceptions

about the expectations and norms determining a qualified teacher can also impact their sense of language competence (Bandura, 1997; Butler, 2004). The level of proficiency in this study was identified in terms of seven language sub-skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. This scale was based on a 6 point scale: Level 1 mirrored the lowest level of proficiency, and Level 6 the highest, native-like competence. Based on the obtained scores from the participants of the present study, those who scored below the mean ($M = .16$) were considered as low-proficiency individuals and those scoring above the mean as high-proficiency individuals. This scale was subjected to reliability analysis and the alpha level pinpointed a high level (.91).

Procedure

Data were collected from 50 EFL university teachers. The soft copies of the questionnaires were administered to the teachers via emails because data could be gathered from many respondents within a short period of time. Some demographic information about the teachers such as age, gender, years of teaching experience, place of teaching, and level of education were also included in the first page of the questionnaires. Completion of the questionnaires took no more than 30 minutes and the questionnaires were sent back within one month.

Data Analyses

The gathered data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 21. A significance level of 0.05 ($p < 0.05$) was set. Descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations and a Spearman correlation were used for the research question in this study.

Results

A Spearman correlation was run to determine the relationship between self-efficacy perceptions and the level of proficiency of the teachers. There was a moderate, positive correlation between self-efficacy beliefs of teachers and their level of proficiency, which was statistically significant ($r = .430, p = .002$).

Table 1. Correlation Results for the Relationship between Efficacy and Proficiency

Efficacy	Efficacy Proficiency	
	Pearson Correlation	
	1	.430**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002
N	50	50

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

In order to see if the level of proficiency could predict the changes in the dependent variable, that is the self-efficacy, a Regression analysis was carried out. The results are depicted in Table 2.

Table 2. Regression Results for Proficiency Predicting Efficacy

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
1 (Constant)	37.825	2.358		16.043	.000
Proficiency	5.730	1.738	.430	3.297	.002

a. Dependent Variable: Efficacy

According to Table 2, the regression model statistically significantly predicted the efficacy variable showing that it is a good fit for the data ($\beta = .430, p = .002$).

Discussion

The quantitative analyses of the data clearly showed a significant relationship between the teachers' level of proficiency and their self-efficacy ratings. English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers' high sense of efficiency suggests their commitment to their "sense of plausibility" to invoke Prabhus' (1990) terms. The commitment naturally brings with itself the spending of more time to the areas of difficulty in teaching and the devotion of more time to academic subjects, which requires a high level of linguistic capability. In fact, this result was quite predictable since linguistic competence brings about the adequate skills of handling the classroom, dealing with challenges and keeping the necessary efficacy for the fulfillment of the job.

The area of teaching proficiency and efficacy has been a controversial one, with very different research findings. Bandura (1994) and Chacon (2005) suggested that instructional proficiency is a major determinant of self-efficacy beliefs among teachers. However, Penrose, Perry and Ball (2007) found that compared to emotional intelligence, the status and the competence of teachers did not influence self-efficacy. The study has demonstrated that a teacher's level of emotional intelligence is related to their sense of efficacy, independent of their gender, age, status, and proficiency. Four years earlier, a study by Hoy and Woolfolk (1993) yielded weak correlations between personal teacher self-efficacy and teaching capabilities. The last two studies are in contrast with the findings of the present study which showed significant effect for the proficiency factor.

The obtained results provide evidence to advocate the theoretical stance (Phillipson, 1992; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004) that both linguistic and pedagogical competences are significant contributors to understanding the professional status, development, and instructional approaches practiced by English teachers. Educational programs play a significant role in the formation and development of teacher's sense of self-efficacy and the development of instructional abilities. Woolfolk (2010) in this respect argues that: "any experience or training that helps you succeed in the day-to-day tasks of teaching will give a foundation for developing a sense of efficacy in your career" (p. 356). The underlying assumption is that effective training must provide teachers with opportunities to extend their training activities to the daily teaching. Seeing the generalizability and successful application of these techniques to the classroom, teachers' self-efficacy beliefs can be increased and strengthened which, in turn, can lead to their ability in the better delivery of the subject matter in the classroom.

There are other ways in which teachers' sense of self-efficacy can be developed. One way is the receiving of constructive feedback and support from others. Bandura (1997) suggests "mentors must be good diagnosticians of strengths and weaknesses and knowledgeable about how to tailor activities to turn potentiality into actuality" (p. 106). Feedback to teachers can be effective only if it is presented constructively and balanced with positive feedback. When teachers are given clear and effective feedback they should be guided towards the development of competence (Schinke & Tabakman, 2001).

Another way of helping teachers to develop self-efficacy abilities is that they can be given an opportunity by their trainers to observe a model teacher. This does not mean "the initiation by imitation" in Widdowson's (2003) terms. In the opinion of Widdowson, "It is widely supposed that the most effective kind of preparation for novice teachers is to develop common sense or 'know how' by following the example of teachers who have already become expert by experience" (p. 3).

Widdowson (2003) argues that there are problems with this approach. It presupposes that the experience and the expertise of teachers are relevant and effective for the present needs of novice teachers. If novice teachers are to learn from their more experienced colleagues, it should not be limited to uncritical and passive imitation. Teachers should adapt the activities of more expert teachers to their own classroom contexts. They should be reflective upon the teaching they do.

Suggestions for Further Research

The present research focused on the analyses of the language teachers' self-efficacy beliefs and their level of linguistic proficiency. The future investigations can center on more specific issues:

One of the most important points to be considered in the teachers' self-efficacy beliefs is that the individual differences play an important role in the practice of teaching and learning. Teachers' individual differences include learning styles, learning strategies, learning aptitude, age, gender, cultural background, background knowledge, and the affective domain (i.e., motivation, anxiety, tolerance of ambiguity, burnout, and so forth). Due to some restrictions, these individual-difference variables have not been taken into account in the present study. Further studies are suggested to investigate these different variables. As a result, individual differences and their possible effects on the self-efficacy and linguistic expertise of teachers can be better understood.

The present study was conducted with both the low and high level teachers in terms of their proficiency; however, other studies can be carried out to examine the self-efficacy beliefs and abilities of teachers in pre-service period. This is an important line of research since the self-efficacy of teachers is shaped and developed during their training. So, research can be conducted in this area to signify the weaknesses and problems and also the strengths of training programs from the perspective of self-efficacy development as its offshoot.

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Appendix A

Gibson and Dembo's Teacher Efficacy Scale (1984)

Dear Participants,

This questionnaire is part of a research project that investigates teacher efficacy beliefs. Your valuable opinions and answers will be appreciated.

	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Disagree slightly more than agree	Agree slightly more than disagree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
If a student masters a new math concept quickly, this might be because I knew the necessary steps in teaching that concept.						
When the grades of my students improve it is usually because I found more effective teaching approaches.						
When I really try, I can get through to most difficult students.						
If a student did not remember information I gave in a previous lesson, I						

	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Disagree slightly more than agree	Agree slightly more than disagree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
would know how to increase his/her retention in the next lesson.						
When a student does better than usual, many times it is because I exerted a little extra effort.						
If a student in my class becomes disruptive and noisy, I feel assured that I know some techniques to redirect him quickly.						
If one of my students could not do a class assignment, I would be able to accurately assess whether the assignment was at the correct level of difficulty.						
When a student is having difficulty with an assignment, I am usually able to adjust it to his/her level.						
When a student gets a better grade than he usually gets, it is usually because I found better ways of teaching that student.						

	Strongly disagree	Moderately disagree	Disagree slightly more than agree	Agree slightly more than disagree	Moderately agree	Strongly agree
A teacher is very limited in what he/she can achieve because a student's home environment is a large influence on his/her achievement.						
If students are not disciplined at home, they aren't likely to accept any discipline.						
The hours in my class have little influence on students compared to the influence of their home environment.						
The amount that a student can learn is primarily related to family background.						
The influences of a student's home experiences can be overcome by good teaching.						
If parents would do more with their children, I could do more.						
Even a teacher with good teaching abilities may not reach many students.						

Thank you!

Appendix B

English Language Proficiency Self-rating

Level Self-rating	Minimum Description
1, 1.5	I can speak using only short question-and-answer patterns such as “How are you?” “I am fine, thank you.”
2	I can participate in a simple conversation on familiar everyday topics at slower-than-normal speed. I must frequently pause during conversation.
2.5, 3	I can express myself using simple language but make mistakes and pause a lot when I try to express complex ideas.
3.5, 4	I can effortlessly express myself at near normal speed. Occasionally, I have to slow down when expressing complex ideas and less-common expressions.
4.5, 5	I am generally fluent but occasionally have minor pauses when I search for the correct manner of expression.
5.5, 6	I have native-like fluency.

Other sub-skill surveys: listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar

Author Biography



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