

Original Article

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION OF AN ASYLUM SEEKER IN SHARON BALA'S THE BOAT PEOPLE

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ABSTRACT

Second language acquisition is a critical yet challenging process for asylum seekers. It is often complicated by factors such as trauma, stress, and interrupted education. The study focuses on Mahindan, an asylum seeker who recognised language proficiency as essential for his survival and sustained life in the host country. This paper analyses the second language acquisition journey of Mahindan through Albert Bandura's Self-efficacy theory. The theory suggests that an individual's belief in their own ability to succeed in specific situations is a powerful determinant of their motivation and behaviour. This analysis details the four components of Self-efficacy. They are performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. Mahindan in *The Boat People* formed a rigorous self-regulation to transform his own habits and learning. The paper further discusses the language barriers Mahindan faced, the challenges he overcame, and the efforts he made to achieve his language acquisition goal.

Keywords: Second Language Acquisition, Asylum Seeker, the Boat People, Albert Bandura, Social Efficacy Theory

INTRODUCTION

The global landscape is changed by the increasing displacement of people, and the report indicates that "At least 100 million people were forced to flee their homes during the last 10 years, seeking refuge either within or outside the borders of their country" [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(2020\)](#). These refugees are forced to seek asylum by crossing the international border due to various forms of persecution and political unrest. Refugee status determination is the legal administrative process by which the host country's government or UNHCR determines whether that person really needs the protection or rejection and permanent deportation. Beyond the immediate legal difficulty, refugees are often faced with issues related to mental trauma, malnutrition and citizenship related problems. But for many the very journey to the host country is an act of hopelessness, often involving sea voyages that risk their lives. This study focuses on Mahindan who done a long voyage before reaching Canada. It explores Mahindan's second language acquisition through Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory.

SELF-EFFICACY IN SHARON BALA'S THE BOAT PEOPLE

Sharon Bala's novel, *The Boat People*, explores the struggles of 500 asylum seekers who come in a boat from Sri Lanka to Canada. This novel fictionalised the real-life arrival that happened in "October 2009 and August 2010, the Ocean Lady and the MV Sun Sea

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arrived on the coast of British Columbia, bearing together just over 550 Tamil refugees from Sri Lanka. Those vessels and their passengers were the inspiration for this novel" Bala (2018). The narrative centres on Mahindan, an asylum seeker and a widower who reaches Canada with the hope of finding a secure and protected place. However, the situation got worse for him due to the strict response of the government. The Canadian government suspects the asylum seekers are terrorists. The passengers were subjected by the government to prolonged detention, intensive interrogation and energetic efforts to exclude them from the refugee process or to contest their claim if they succeeded in entering the refugee process. In between these situations Mahindan made the strategic decision to learn the host country's language, English. This acquisition is not for educational pursuit but as an act of self-empowerment.

Second language acquisition is a normal part of the refugee integration process. Yet for asylum seekers this process becomes complicated by factors such as learners' innate skill, the complexity level of the target language, and the psychological weight of war, loss, and detention. The study attempts an analysis of Mahindan's journey into second language acquisition through the lens of Albert Bandura's Self-efficacy theory. This framework explores a person's belief in his or her ability to succeed in specific situations and analyse how they approach goals, tasks and challenges. This provides a valid structure for understanding Mahindan's self-efficacy. Self-efficacy, according to Bandura, is not a measure of one's skill but a belief in what one can do with the skills one possesses. It is driven by four distinct components. They are performance accomplishments, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion and emotional arousal. These components collectively shape the strength of an individual's self-efficacy.

The most influential source for developing self-efficacy is performance accomplishments, also referred as mastery experience. Bandura argued that successful performance in a task strengthens the belief in one's abilities, and on the other hand, repeated failures, especially at the early stages, tend to slow the process. He further tells that mistakes are part of successful performance. For Mahindan, learning English is a goal for him and it is connected with two objectives. The first one is successfully attending the detention review hearing, and the next is ensuring his survival in the Canadian society after his refugee status approval. His initial attempts to learn English are self-guided efforts that show off his high degree of intrinsic motivation. The novel represents his approach for learning the language, such as expanding his vocabulary even with simple observation as "Bus. Here. Now. Every day, his store of vocabulary expanded" Bala (2018). His daily success, even though minor, is evidence for his capability and self-mastering.

The acquisition of a second language is not a linear process. It comes along with arrows, miscommunications and mental tiredness. In the process, it is noted that "After strong efficacy expectations are developed through repeated success, the negative impact of occasional failures is likely to be reduced." Bandura (1977). Mahindan's willingness to face and recover from linguistic mistakes demonstrates this developed self-efficacy. His initial success is the solid evidence that his own action can yield positive outcomes in his second language acquisition progress. Upon his initial stage all other sources of efficacy are built.

The second major source for self-efficacy is vicarious experiences. It is derived from "Seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences can generate expectations in observers that they too will improve if they intensify and persist in their efforts" Bandura (1977). For asylum seekers who exist in a state of vulnerability and uncertainty, fellow boat people who are well versed in the target language become models of success and these models function as mastery models. In *The Boat People*, the character Prasad serves as Mahindan's primary master model. Prasad, an intellectual and former journalist from Sri Lanka, is notably fluent in English. He was mentioned by the lawyer as "He's our best bet. Our model migrant." Bala (2018). Mahindan observes that Prasad successfully completed the detention review, and he believes that "... judges were sure to be impressed by his English" (Bala 264), directly connecting the target language mastery that was helpful for his legal success. This observation fuels Mahindan's own motivation, and he convinces himself that his goal is achievable. Mahindan's learning extended beyond Prasad. He also takes inspiration from observing professionals like Charilika "...wore suits and spoke in English" Bala (2018). This continuous exposure to successful second language users within and outside the detention contexts helps Mahindan to tune his own potential.

The third source of self-efficacy is verbal persuasion, which involves people being convinced by others that they possess the capabilities to master their activities and achieve success. This encouragement is often delivered through suggestion or motivation, and that can be a powerful tool for an individual who "... can cope successfully with what has overwhelmed them in the past" (Bandura 198). Also, Bandura noted that verbal persuasion alone is less powerful while compared with mastery experience. In the novel, a key moment occurs during a conversation about food, "There were things that had no Tamil equivalent. Prasad said lasagna was Italian. Lasagna. Mahindan took it out for a test run, feeling the foreign sounds rattle against his teeth, working his tongue around the vowels." Bala (2018). This simple act of identification and pronunciation taught by Prasad was explored as a form of verbal persuasion. Here Prasad's comment is a casual piece of linguistic and cultural information. Prasad's comment encouraged Mahindan to experiment with the unfamiliar foreign sound. The verbal persuasion acts as a catalyst and makes him engage with the language physically and mentally that reinforces his emerging linguistic self-efficacy.

The final component influencing self-efficacy is emotional arousal, which refers to the physiological and affective states experienced by an individual in response to a challenging situation. High levels of stress, anxiety, fear and tension are signs of personal vulnerability. It has severely affected the self-efficacy of an individual. Bandura explained that such emotional reactions can lead to "generate further fear of impending stressful situations through anticipatory self-arousal." (Bandura 199). For Mahindan, this component is deeply intertwined with the extreme stress of the asylum and detention context. Fear of permanent detention, the uncertainty of the legal status, and the social pressure of being an asylum seeker are continuous sources of negative emotional

arousal for Mahindan. People who come with Mahindan mostly get the refugee status, and his claim remains suspended, which leads to the downfall of his self-efficacy. He fully comprehends his son Sellian's outburst, "I hate English." He kicked out and the other boot fell over. 'Stupid language'" Bala (2018), because he experiences the same deep-seated frustration. The emotional burden of second language acquisition is described as

The language was exhausting, all the irregular verbs, the slow, tedious work of conjugation. Even the simplest sentence was an effort to construct. He laboured over every consonant and vowel, stumbled over the silent k's, acutely conscious of how awkward and tongue-tied he must sound, how different his pronunciation was from that of Canadians. Bala (2018)

The above passage highlights the profound effect of self-efficacy with emotional arousal. However, the self-efficacy theory is not laid on to show the mere emotions but Mahindan's management of them. His ultimate recognition that "Language was a superpower" Bala (2018), led him to learn the language continuously with self-efficacy.

CONCLUSION

This research paper explores Sharon Bala's *The Boat People* with Albert Bandura's self-efficacy theory. This framework is for understanding the motivational dynamics of second language acquisition of an asylum seeker. Mahindan's consistent dedication helps him to overcome initial language issues through performance accomplishments. His observation of successful peers like Prasad provided vicarious experiences for transforming his abstract goals into an achievable outcome. Verbal persuasion encouraged him to experiment with foreign sounds. Finally, his anxiety and exhaustion of detention and second language acquisition struggles confirmed his ability to manage the emotional arousal. "His motto: Learn English, get a job, find a small place to live." Bala (2018), this is the ultimate ambition of Mahindan. By focusing on his self-efficacy Mahindan broke the limitation imposed upon him. It shows the inner belief of one's own capacity, and indeed self-efficacy is the most powerful psychological tool in the fight for a new life.

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