



## **Evaluating Target Language Reading Self-Efficacy Scales: Applying Principles Gleaned from Bandura's Writings**

**L. Aaron Mullins**

Georgia State University

### **ABSTRACT**

*Self-efficacy is one's belief in one's capacity to organize and execute a course of action and serves as a motivating factor, since people tend to seek opportunities in areas where they feel efficacious and avoid areas where they believe they might fail (Bandura, 1997). Furthermore, as language learners' feelings of efficacy increase, so does the effort they invest in language learning (Piniel & Csizér, 2013). Additionally, an effective language acquisition tool is target language reading (TLR) (Horst, 2005; Krashen, 1989, 2004; Pulido, 2007; Reynolds, 2015; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007). Therefore, it follows that learners may benefit from further studies in TLR and perceived self-efficacy. This article presents ten principles gleaned from the writings of Bandura (1997, 2006) that provide criteria to evaluate self-efficacy scales. The article then applies these principles to five reading self-efficacy questionnaires. The article does not determine which scale is best, but it provides foreign language researchers with a set of principles by which they can identify the desired qualities and avoid common pitfalls associated with target language reading self-efficacy research. The best efficacy scale will depend upon the question the research hopes to answer; however, without guidance, many current efficacy scales fail at measuring efficacy.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Self-efficacy is, a set of domain specific beliefs about one's competence to perform specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). Bandura explained that these beliefs develop as one actively performs tasks, watches others perform such tasks, receives feedback, and internalizes the emotions associated with these performances. Studies confirm that addressing self-efficacy benefits learning and that self-efficacy beliefs can be significantly altered by the educational experiences in which students are engaged (Barber et al., 2015; Topcu, 2011; Wernersbach, Crowley, Bates, & Rosenthal, 2014). Furthermore, within the domain of foreign language study, Piniel and Csizér (2013) concluded that "enhancing self-efficacy can increase the amount of effort invested in language learning" (p. 539). It can therefore be concluded that, as teachers and educational researchers seek means to increase students' language proficiency, they should also address the students' perceived self-efficacy.

Addressing students' perceived target language reading self-efficacy may prove especially beneficial as reading is essential to foreign language learning (Villanueva de Debat,

2006), and without reading, language learners may find their progress with the language stymied (Anderson, 2003). Multiple studies have demonstrated that reading promotes language acquisition and that text comprehension is a key factor in increasing linguistic competence (Horst, 2005; Krashen, 1989, 2004; Pulido, 2007; Reynolds, 2015; Tanaka & Stapleton, 2007). However, there appears to be a dearth of research examining target language reading self-efficacy. A search of the EBSCO database, covering the past five years, located only seven peer-reviewed articles that measured target language reading self-efficacy; two of these articles utilized scales that are not available in English, and a third did not provide details about the scale items. This leaves four scales that can be examined with the goal of providing future researchers tools with which to examine target-language reading self-efficacy. This article proposes to analyze the self-efficacy scales utilized in these four studies and to evaluate how well they align with Bandura's (1997, 2006) guidelines for writing self-efficacy scales. The author will additionally introduce the Spanish reading self-efficacy questionnaire which was developed to measure the target language reading self-efficacy of novice language learners.

### **BANDURA'S PRINCIPLE FOR SELF-EFFICACY MEASURES**

Bandura (1997, 2006) wrote explicitly about the formation of self-efficacy scales. Within these documents, he presented several principles that should be followed when writing efficacy scales. A summary of these principles follows:

1. "The items should be phrased in terms of *can do* rather than *will do*." *Can* is a judgement of capability; *will* is a statement of intention" (Bandura, 2006, p. 308 emphasis in original);
2. Items should be clear and unambiguous. They should provide context so that, as people rate their self-efficacy, they understand the impediments and challenges associated with the tasks to be performed (Bandura, 1997);
3. Self-efficacy is domain specific; therefore, items need to be tailored to specific domains of functioning (Bandura, 1997). "Perceived efficacy should be measured against levels of task demands that represent gradations of challenges or impediments to successful performance" (Bandura, 2006, p. 311). The need for gradations of challenge invalidates single item efficacy scales;
4. Enough challenge or impediments should be built into the efficacy items to avoid a ceiling effect (Bandura, 1997, 2006);
5. Items should ask about one's competence to perform the task now rather than in some nebulous future (Bandura, 1997);
6. Each item's content must represent beliefs about one's abilities to produce a specific level of performance and must avoid measures of other constructs such as self-worth, locus of control, or outcome expectancies (Bandura, 1997);
7. Items are arranged randomly or from least challenging to most challenging. Scales arranged from most challenging to least challenging have been shown to produce a slightly higher self-efficacy appraisal (Berry, West, & Dennehey, 1989). The preferred format is the one that minimizes the questionnaire's influence over the participant's rankings (Bandura, 1997);
8. Participants "record the strength of their efficacy beliefs on a 100-point scale, ranging in 10-unit intervals from 0 ('Cannot do'); through intermediate degrees of assurance,

- 50 ('Moderately certain can do'); to complete assurance, 100 ('Highly certain can do')" (Bandura, 2006, p. 312). Bandura explained that people tend to avoid the extreme positions which can reduce the reliability of the data as having few options forces individuals who would differentiate themselves to select the same response category;
9. The scale must measure what it purports to measure. "There is no singular validity coefficient" (Bandura, 2006, p. 319); however, Bandura (1997) explained that a 10. perceived self-efficacy scale's validity is demonstrated by its predictive power;
  10. "The subskills necessary for performance contribute to the judgement of operative efficacy but do not substitute for it" (Bandura, 1997, p. 38). Bandura explained that it is not the fact that one can steer, maintain speed, and shift gears that is important. It is the ability to maneuver an automobile through narrow streets, crowded freeways, long stretches of deserted highways and rush hour traffic that is important. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

## EVALUATING SELF-EFFICACY MEASURES

### Target Language Reading Self-Efficacy Scale 1

Ahmadian and Pasand (2017) utilized a 10-item questionnaire to measure the self-efficacy of 63 Persian speakers majoring in English Language and Literature. Ahmadian and Pasand adopted a questionnaire developed by Zare and Davoudi Mobarakeh (2011), and the reliability of the questionnaire was Cronbach alpha = 0.85. Table 1 is a copy of the reading self-efficacy questionnaire that Zare and Davoudi Mobarakeh developed.

**Table 1. English reading self-efficacy scale developed by Zare and Davoudi Mobarakeh (2011).**

#### Reading self-efficacy Questionnaire

Notes: please read the following questions carefully and make an accurate evaluation of your reading abilities no matter whether you are doing it or not. These questions are designed to measure your judgement of your capabilities, so there is no right or wrong answers. Please do not write your name, but you should answer all of the questions and write down your student number.

Please use the following scales to answer these questions accordingly. Please choose the number accurately representing your capabilities.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7					
	I cannot do it at all	I cannot do it.	Maybe I cannot do it.	Maybe I can do it.	I basically can do it	I can do it	I can do it well					
1	Can you finish your homework of English reading all by yourself?					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
2	Can you read and understand the English information on the Internet?					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
3	Can you read and understand English newspapers?					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
4	Can you read and understand new lessons in your comprehensive English course book?					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
5	Can you read and understand English advertisements of English commodities?					1	2	3	4	5	6	7
6	Can you read and understand English poems?					1	2	3	4	5	6	7

7	Can you read and understand a letter from an American pen pal introducing his or her college life?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	Can you read and understand English short novels?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
9	Can you read and understand an English tourist brochure introducing western countries?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
10	Can you read and understand English popular science books?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Source: Zare, M., & Davoudi Mobarakeh, S. (2011). The Relationship Between Self-Efficacy and Use of Reading Strategies: The Case of Iranian Senior High School Students. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 3(3), 98-105. doi:10.3968j.sll.1923156320110303.148. Used with permission.

Zare and Davoudi Mabarakeh's (2011) scale applied nearly all of Bandura's (1997, 2006) principles as previously outlined. Each of the items is written in the form of a can-do statement. The tasks are unambiguous, and each task ties to the domain of target language reading. Each item provides a context to help the participants understand the demands of the task. Furthermore, the scale presents a wide range of challenges, as the difficulty ranges from the participants' English course textbook, something they should have been prepared to read, to newspapers, short novels, and poetry. This range represents several levels of gradation and contains enough challenge to prevent a ceiling effect.

The self-efficacy questionnaire, as presented by Zare and Davoudi Mabarakeh, utilized a seven-point Likert scale. Bandura (1997, 2006) suggested a 100-point or a 10-point scale to protect the scale's differentiating power. Bandura explained that people typically avoid the extreme points of the scale. Many people, for example, would not select the answer categories one and seven. When Ahmadian and Pasand (2017) piloted Zare and Davoudi Mabarakeh's scale, they found that two categories were unanimously ignored by the participants; so, they reduced the scale to a five-point Likert scale. The one weakness of this questionnaire may be the use of the seven-point Likert scale. The Likert scale has the advantage in that it labels each response category providing clarity to the rankings; however, Bandura (2006) suggested that the ranking be modeled for participants using a physical activity such as lifting weights. Utilizing the modeling process trains the participants on what the selection of a measure of 0, 20, 50, 70, or 100 represents and protects the scale's power to differentiate among participants.

Overall, the scale is well constructed. To ensure validity, the items were reviewed by three, experienced English teachers working in an Iranian high school setting and two professors of English. The scale was also piloted and revised. The participants in Zare and Davoudi Mobarakeh's (2011) study had all studied English for at least six years; therefore, this scale may be best used with participants who are at least at the intermediate level in their language study.

## Target Language Reading Self-Efficacy Scale 2

The second reading self-efficacy scale was utilized in a study to measure how a learning strategies model might enhance the target language reading self-efficacy beliefs of 33 first year undergraduate English teaching majors enrolled in a preparatory course for English as an international language (Kakaew & Damnet, 2017).

Kakaew and Damnet, after collecting demographic information, measured self-efficacy, using 13 items measured on a five-point Likert scale. They then followed up on these items with three more open ended questions. The format of the exact questionnaire used in the study is not available; however, Kakaew and Damnet provided the thirteen items and the follow up

questions. (See [Kakaew and Damnet, 2017, p. 24](#) for a complete list of the items included in their scale.)

The developers of this scale, as they considered what is required to be successful in the domain of target language reading, included the need to be able to maintain one's focus while reading different styles of texts: western and Asian. This does not violate the principle that items need to be tailored to specific domains. Bandura (2006) gave the example of measuring someone's self-efficacy to maintain a healthy weight. To be successful, one must be efficacious in purchasing foods that promote a healthy weight, preparing these foods, controlling portions while eating and maintaining an exercise routine. Like the healthy weight example, target language reading can be influenced by one's ability to focus; therefore, item 1 would be an acceptable item to include on the scale.

However, many of the other items violate several of the principles outlined by Bandura. Only three of the items (items 3, 12, and 13) are written as "I can" statements. The others are statements of belief (items 2, 5, and 7), possession (item 10), emotion (items 4 and 6), or behavioral patterns (item 8).

Statements such as item 2, "I believe that my proficiency in reading English texts develops every day", fail to measure one's belief in their competency to complete a task at this very moment in time. While a strong belief about improvement is good, it does not provide competency data. Item 5, "My teacher believes that I am proficient in reading comprehension", also fails to measure competency. It centers on what the teacher believes rather than what the student believes he/she can do. The teacher's beliefs may contribute to a student's sense of self-worth, but this item also fails to measure competency. Item 7, "I believe I can improve my course grades by practicing reading English texts more", examines one's beliefs about locus of control rather than beliefs about one's competency. As Bandura (1997) suggested, one may feel that reading in the target language every day would improve performance or grades; however, the item fails to measure one's ability to complete the actual daily reading.

Item 10, "I do not have any problems with reading comprehension" focuses on the impediment to successful target language reading comprehension rather than on a graded task. A novice language learner would have few problems with reading comprehension if the reading was limited to the formulaic phrases the learner has memorized. Better would be items that address specific reading tasks in the target language. Can the language learner read and understand a story from the target language textbook? Can the learner read and understand a target language newspaper? Can the learner read and understand a short novel written in the target language? These questions increase incrementally in task difficulty and would require the participants to measure their competency beliefs based on the challenges each task provides. Such tasks would, according to Bandura (1997, 2006), provide data that could more accurately predict performance.

As discussed earlier, Bandura would not have approved of the use of a 5-point Likert scale. Furthermore, Bandura stressed the need for clarity and context in the items. This self-efficacy scale lacks context, and the wording of the open-ended items is such that a participant would need a course to simply comprehend the items. Participants would need to understand several terms that, at least in western culture, may not be a part of most students' vocabulary. Terms such as "self-efficacy," "western style writing," "Asian style writing," "western deductive style writing," and "Asian inductive style writing" could prevent participants from attempting to answer the questions or cause them to provide inaccurate responses. Each of these terms represents a complex concept and could require participation in a university-level course to reach

the level of concept understanding needed to accurately answer the questions. The participants in this study may have possessed this terminology, or clarity may have been lost in translation; however, the use of this terminology would limit the use of this scale in future studies.

Overall, this target language reading self-efficacy scale may not be the best to utilize as it is or to modify it for future studies. The scale does not align with the principles Bandura outlined. Especially, it is not limited to the assessment of self-efficacy. Several other constructs, self-worth and locus of control, are measured by this scale.

### **Target Language Reading Self-Efficacy Scale 3**

In Boakye's (2015) study of self-efficacy and reading proficiency, 659 students considered to be at low risk for academic failure and 1009 students at high risk of academic failure completed a questionnaire that was adapted from the work of Grabe and Stoller (2002) and Guthrie, Wigfield, and VonSecker (2000). Grabe and Stoller's work is a collection of research on second language reading, but a perusal of the index and introduction does not indicate that any portion of it focuses on target language reading self-efficacy. The work of Guthrie, Wigfield, and VonSecker examines reading motivation rather than reading self-efficacy. The fact that Boakye drew upon their work to design the efficacy scale used in this study might explain why none of the items align with Bandura's principles. Boyake's self-efficacy questionnaire contained 10 items measured on a 5-point Likert scale and had a Cronbach alpha measure of 0.87. (See [Boyake, 2015, p. 9](#) to examine the complete scale.)

The questionnaire might effectively identify difficulties language learners experience during target language reading; however, the items fail to measure the participants' beliefs about their target language reading competency. The first item, "I think I read well and with understanding" sounds like a measure of reading competency but is actually a measure of global self-worth. It lacks the context that defines the task's challenge. The second item, "I read slowly so I have problems with understanding" and the fourth, "I read slowly so it makes me tired and bored" identify common problems faced by slow readers but fail to measure competency beliefs. All the items would be helpful to a researcher attempting to identify common reading struggles among language learners at risk of academic failure, but the scale cannot be used to measure target language reading self-efficacy, as none of the items asks students to measure their competency beliefs. The items in this scale were not effectively designed to collect data that can answer questions about efficacy beliefs; however, the data could answer questions about the target language reading challenges faced by students at risk of academic failure.

### **Target Language Reading Self-Efficacy Scale 4**

In their study of 59 first-year Japanese English as a foreign language students, McLean and Poulshock (2018) examined increases in target language reading self-efficacy among three reading conditions: 1) students who were verbally encouraged to read, 2) students who were engaged in in-class sustained silent reading, and 3) students who were given weekly reading word targets. To measure the students' perceived target reading self-efficacy, McLean and Poulshock used, without modification, the "Reading self-efficacy questionnaire" (Burrows, 2012). Burrows's questionnaire is a 14-item scale in which each task is aligned with the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL, 1986). McLean and Poulshock found the scale to be very reliable. They found a Rasch item reliability estimate of 0.99 and a Rasch person reliability of

0.89. As shown on Table 2, Burrows's scale uses a 6-point Likert scale to measure the self-efficacy of his participants.

**Table 2.** Reading self-efficacy questionnaire developed by Burrows (2012) and utilized by McLean and Poulshock (2018).

Reading Self-efficacy Questionnaire						
Please use the following scale (1-6) to answer the questions. Chose the number that best describes how sure you are that you can perform each of the English reading tasks below. All of the items refer to reading in English.						
1	2	3	4	5	6	
I cannot do it at all.	I probably cannot do it.	Maybe I cannot do it.	Maybe I can do it.	I probably can do it.	I can definitely do it.	
1.	Read and understand the specific details of a children's book written in English.			1	2	3 4 5 6
2.	Read and understand the main ideas of a 20-page book written for English-speaking teenagers.			1	2	3 4 5 6
3.	Read and understand the directions (written in English) on how to use a new electronic dictionary.			1	2	3 4 5 6
4.	Read and understand the lyrics of a song written in English.			1	2	3 4 5 6
5.	Read and understand the specific details of a from an American pen-pal discussing what he did over his summer vacation.			1	2	3 4 5 6
6.	Read and understand the English subtitles in an American movie.			1	2	3 4 5 6
7.	Read and understand the specific details of a one-page magazine article written in English and related to one of my hobbies (i.e., fashion, sports, music, movies).			1	2	3 4 5 6
8.	Read and understand the main ideas of a front-page article in a newspaper published in an English-speaking country.			1	2	3 4 5 6
9.	Read and understand the items on a menu written in English at a fast-food restaurant.			1	2	3 4 5 6
10.	Read and understand the specific details of a party invitation written in English.			1	2	3 4 5 6
11.	Read and understand the specific details of a business letter in English.			1	2	3 4 5 6
12.	Read and understand the specific details of an article in a newspaper published in an English-speaking country that is written about a topic related to your major (economics, law) at university.			1	2	3 4 5 6
13.	Read and understand the main ideas of an article in a newspaper published in an English-speaking country that is written about a topic related to your major (economics, law) at university.			1	2	3 4 5 6
14.	Read and understand the contents and times of specific TV programs in a TV guide written in English.			1	2	3 4 5 6

Source: Burrows, L. (2012). *The effects of extensive reading and reading strategies on reading self-efficacy*. (Ed.D), Temple University, Philadelphia, PA. (11040). Used with permission.

The reading self-efficacy questionnaire, designed by Burrows (2012), aligns extremely well with the principles Bandura outlined. Each item on the scale is presented as a can-do statement. Each item provides an unambiguous, well contextualized task that asks the participants to select the number which best represents how sure they are that they can perform

each English reading task. The tasks are presented in a random order which lessens the influence the scale itself might have over the ratings of self-efficacy. Furthermore, the items present a range of tasks which vary in the level of challenge they provide the participants.

While the scale presents many strengths and follows closely Bandura's guidelines, the scale has two potential weaknesses: 1) the level of challenge may not be enough to avoid the ceiling effect if used by advanced learners, and 2) the participants respond to each task on a very limited scale. A six-point Likert scale, if people avoid the extremes, forces the participants to select from among only four options. If Bandura's (1997, 2006) ten-point scale were to be used, Burrows's questionnaire would be strengthened and could better differentiate the participants' levels of efficacy. Currently, many participants, who might differentiate themselves, are forced to select the same response category, as intermediate options are not available.

### Target Language Reading Self-Efficacy Scale 5

The Spanish reading self-efficacy questionnaire was developed by Mullins (2018) to study the influence of personalized texts on the target-language reading self-efficacy of novice language learners. The Cronbach alpha for the Spanish reading self-efficacy questionnaire was a 0.93. Validity was ensured by individually pilot testing the scale with three novice language learners and revising the items they found confusing, either for wording or generational differences. Two, experienced, second-language teachers then reviewed the items, and final adjustments were made to ensure that the range of tasks would prevent any ceiling effect. Table 3 contains the Spanish reading self-efficacy questionnaire.

**Table 3.** Spanish reading self-efficacy questionnaire as developed by Mullins (2018).

#### Spanish Reading Self-Efficacy Questionnaire

For each of the tasks below, you will indicate how confident you are that you can complete the described task. You are rating how confident you are that you can do the task right now. A rating of zero would indicate that you are sure you cannot do the task. A rating of 100 indicates that you are absolutely sure you can complete the task. You may give yourself any rating between 0 and 100. No scores below zero or over 100 can be included.

	Task	Rating from 0 to 100
1	While reading in Spanish, I can tell if a word is a noun, verb, adjective etc.	
2	When reading in Spanish, I can pronounce the individual words.	
3	When I am reading in Spanish, I can sound out words that are new to me.	
4	When reading in Spanish, I understand the meaning of endings that make words plurals, change verb tense (present, past, future) or are prefixes and suffixes.	
5	While reading in Spanish, I can use what I already know to help me to help me understand new material.	
6	While reading in Spanish, I can recognize the "main points" or theme in a passage or story.	
7	I can tell when a Spanish sentence is written correctly.	
8	I can read and understand complex, Spanish sentences.	
9	I can read a short story assigned in Spanish class.	



- 10 I can read a familiar picture book such as *Green Eggs and Ham* that has been translated to Spanish.
- 11 If a friend sends me text messages or writes me letters written in Spanish, I can read and understand them.
- 12 I can read and understand a recipe written in Spanish.
- 13 I can read and understand the multiple-choice questions on my Spanish tests.
- 14 I can read and understand articles from Spanish magazines like *People en Español*, *Sports Illustrated Spanish edition* etc. as long as the articles are about activities I like such as sports, television, or movies.
- 15 I can read poems written in Spanish.
- 16 I can read and understand a Spanish newspaper.
- 17 I can read a simplified version of a Spanish novel. This simplified version would be specifically for use in Spanish language classes.
- 18 I can read a simplified version of a Spanish novel that has been simplified for Spanish-speaking children to read.

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Source: Mullins, L. A. (2018). *Personalized texts and second language reading: A study in self-efficacy*. (Ed.D Dissertation), Georgia State University, Atlanta, GA.

The Spanish reading self-efficacy questionnaire (Mullins, 2018), like Burrows's (2012) Reading self-efficacy questionnaire, follows many of the principles outlined by Bandura. All of the items are written as can-do statements. The questionnaire was developed specifically for use with novice language learners and provides an extensive range of challenges for novice level learners. The items are unambiguous, and the participants have an ample number of potential responses, 0 to 100, with which to represent their efficacy beliefs.

A weakness with this scale may be the first eight items. These items represent the components of reading. While they contribute to target language reading self-efficacy, they cannot serve as a substitute for it. Bandura (1997, 2006) emphasized that the tasks within the domain are more important than the components of those tasks. It is the participants' beliefs about their ability to perform the reading tasks that provide the most accurate measures of perceived self-efficacy. The task items are therefore more important. Researchers seeking to measure the target language reading self-efficacy of novice language learners may find it beneficial to consider excluding the first eight items and using only items 9 through 18.

## CONCLUSION

This article gleaned from the writings of Bandura (1997, 2006) ten principles that guide the development and/or selection of efficacy scales, and it analyzed how well five target language reading self-efficacy scales aligned with these principles. Based on this analysis, the following recommendations can be made to researchers seeking to measure target language reading self-efficacy as part of their studies:

1. Prior to developing or selecting a self-efficacy scale, consider the question the study will answer. Verify that a self-efficacy scale will provide the best data to answer the question. Some efficacy scales reviewed for this article identified sources of target language reading difficulties or other self-constructs rather than self-efficacy. Make sure that the tool chosen provides the data desired;
2. Self-efficacy scales that are not worded as *can-do* statements typically fail to measure self-efficacy. They frequently measure some other construct such as

self-worth or simply describe the extent to which common challenges affect the participants;

3. It is crucial to understand the target language reading domain(s) you wish to evaluate. Consider the reading tasks but remember that other aspects of reading, such as the ability to remain focused and withstand minor breakdowns in comprehension may also need to be assessed;
4. Researchers should consider modifying efficacy scales with limited number of response categories by either increasing the options of a Likert scale or allowing participants to select any number within a given range (i.e. 0 to 100).

The purpose of this article is not to identify the best target language reading self-efficacy scales, but to provide a set of guiding principles gleaned from the work of Bandura and to give examples on how those principles might be applied to any self-efficacy scale. Data quality is influenced by the instrument used to collect it; therefore, it is important for researchers to have access to the principles that delineate instrument excellence to ensure that the data collected answers the questions asked.

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***L Aaron Mullins** is at the Department Modern and Classical Languages, Parkview High School, Lilburn, Georgia. He has taught beginning and intermediate Spanish for over 20 years and is interested in improving reading comprehension through personalized texts and through increasing target language reading self-efficacy.*

Email: [aaron\\_mullins@gwinnett.k12.ga.us](mailto:aaron_mullins@gwinnett.k12.ga.us)