



SELF-ESTEEM AND LANGUAGE LEARNING: EMPIRICAL EVIDENCE FROM THE PAST TWO DECADES

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ABSTRACT

Self-esteem is among the well-researched emotional variables in any field of study. Language learning is a specific domain at which self-esteem plays an important role and where it is particularly endangered because of the unique nature of the language classroom. While there is an abundance of studies regarding self-esteem in educational psychology, few have focused on its effect on language learning. This study aimed to present an overview of the current developments and trends in the studies regarding self-esteem and language learning in the past two decades. Employing keyword search collocations of *self-esteem* and *language learning*, *self-esteem* and *second language*, *self-esteem* and *foreign language*, this review utilized 20 articles for full-text analysis after elimination of other variables. The results, divided into three trends, consistently show that there exist relationships between self-esteem and language skills, self-esteem and second or foreign language proficiency, as well as self-esteem and other emotional variables within the language classroom.

Keywords: self-esteem, language learning, second language, language proficiency, correlation

INTRODUCTION

The cognitive and affective variables in learning have a bi-directional interaction. The processes involving the cognitive domain such as assessments, feedback, and analyses produce different affective states. On the other hand, affective factors such as positive and negative emotions, attitudes, and beliefs may shape and influence the cognitive processes (Dörnyei, 2009).

In language learning, the importance of effect remained a longstanding debate among researchers for many years. Primarily, the language was seen solely through a cognitive perspective, with a heavy focus on processing and acquisition (Arnold, 1999; Hulstijn, 2007; Gahs, Behney, & Plonsky, 2013). Recently, however, the attention given to the importance of emotional variables has become prevalent. From viewing the discipline from a cognitive lens alone, researchers began to study affective variables for a deeper and fresher perspective on the language learning process and output. Prior (2019) mentions three conclusive turns that moulded the eventual paradigm shift: the field's cognitive focus, lack of attention to emotion, and also the affective turn. What followed was a shift of focus from the experimental to the more experiential side of language learning. Mirroring the trends of humanistic psychology in the 1960s (Arnold, 1999), the learner was then seen primarily as a feeling, thinking human being who relates to his context. The recognition of this side of humanity applied to language learning can be seen in the unique language teaching methods that reflected the credo of the said era: Lozanov's Suggestopedia, Gattegno's

Silent Way, Curran's Community Language Learning, and Asher's Total Physical Response (Habrat, 2018).

Self-esteem is among the well-researched affective factors in language learning along with anxiety, extroversion-introversion, inhibition, motivation, and learner styles (Brown, 1994). While the definition of the term remains heavily domain-specific, there is a common denominator among its many varied definitions: that it is an evaluation of oneself. Coopersmith (1967) states that self-esteem is an appraisal of oneself in terms of significance, success, and worth (as cited in Koosha, 2011). Dornyei & Ryan (2015) stipulate self-esteem as an assessment of value and self-perception. Harter (2002, in Manning, 2006) defines it as self-acceptance, while Guindon (2002) in Habrat (2013), defines self-esteem as competence, achievement, and interaction with the external world.

Some concepts tend to be muddled with self-esteem because of their interrelatedness. Some of these include self-concept and self-evaluation. Self-concept is the mental image of oneself, while self-evaluation is a process involved in the creation of one's self-esteem (Coopersmith, 1967).

Epstein (in Habrat, 2013) proposed a three-level typology of the self-esteem: global, intermediate, and situational. Global self-esteem pertains to the overall personal evaluation of an individual. It is considered a trait because it is permanent and it is sustained regardless of time and situation. It is important for one to feel "good enough" to maintain it (Rosenberg, 1965; in Moriya, 2019). Intermediate self-esteem, on the other hand, is concerned with one's assessment of oneself in the more context-specific domains, for example, academics, sports, etc. where one's skills and capacities are tested. Situational self-esteem reflects in the everyday interactions that require one's decisions, reactions and responses, and behaviors.

Researchers have found significant relationships between the said levels of specificity of self-esteem and positive emotions. On a general scale, high self-esteem equates to positive emotions, better social adjustment, positive psychological outcomes, and life satisfaction in general (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985; Leary & MacDonald, 2003). On the contrary, low self-esteem leads to low self-appreciation, self-defeating attitudes, psychological and social problems (Narafshan & Noori, 2018). On the intermediate level, significant relationships exist between self-esteem and academic achievement. In this case, self-esteem as a motivational factor was associated with academic achievement (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). While correlational studies yield mostly positive results, the causal direction between self-esteem and academic achievement remains inconclusive. More researches have yet to confirm whether self-esteem affects academic achievement, or the other way around (Koosha, Ketabi & Kassaian, 2011).

Language learning is a very specific academic domain that is strongly connected to strong emotions (Dewale, 2011; Pavlenko, 2005) and wherein the self-esteem is highly endangered (Rubio 2007). Since learners are required to express themselves in a language they are not good at, the concept of the "limited self" emerges. The limited self is the persona a learner projects in the classroom because of the disparity between his thoughts, ideas, and opinion, and his own perceived language proficiency as compared to his actual language proficiency (Arnold, 2007).

Some external factors also influence the self-esteem in language learning, among which is fear of negative evaluation and the effect of significant others. Piechurska-Kuciel (2008) defines the fear of negative evaluation as receiving unfavorable evaluations during social participations. Such perceived evaluations tend to inhibit possible learning opportunities that should transpire in the classroom. Learners with high self-esteem reverse the outcomes of these- they cope and learn from these negative appraisals which further their learning (Piechurska-Kuciel, 2008). On the other hand, the effect of the significant others manifests in how a huge part of one's self-appraisal is dependent on the significant others' opinion (Coopersmith, 1967). Positive appraisal involves respect, acceptance and concern, while negative appraisal involves labelling, criticism, sarcasm, put-downs,

comparisons, and ad hominem (Hoffman, 1999 in Arnold, 2007). Any feedback, whether positive or negative, is a factor in how the learner evaluates himself in the learning context.

While a large amount of research on self-esteem and academic achievement, in general, has been carried out throughout the years, the answer to whether self-esteem is truly a cause, or it is an outcome of academic achievement remains inconclusive. Some results reveal that self-esteem causes achievement and both variables have a positive correlation (Harter, 1983; Beane and Lipka, 1984; Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson, 1988; Rennie, 1991; Lawrence, 1996; Lerner, 1996). Contrarily, there are also some studies that restrain self-esteem as an outcome of achievement and have little to no significant correlation (Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1995; Baumeister, et al, 2003).

Despite there is literature profusion on self-esteem in psychology and other areas of learning, very few have focused on its effect in language learning (Habratt, 2018). Furthermore, there is a lack of general information on the results of the studies conducted in more recent years on the correlation between self-esteem and language learning.

To fill this literature gap, and to provide an overview of the developments, this study then intends to discuss the recent findings of correlational studies on self-esteem and language learning. Consequently, it intends to note the trends and existing research dimensions in the field throughout the 2000s to inform other possible areas that might be undertaken in future studies.

METHOD

This study is a qualitative meta-analysis of existing research on self-esteem and language learning. It employed a keyword search, and inclusion and exclusion criterion, and relevancy evaluation process. The studies involved in this review were selected based on the following keyword pairing collocations: *self-esteem* and *language learning*, *self-esteem* and *second language*, *self-esteem* and *foreign language*, and were searched from the following databases: Google Scholar, ERIC, and ProQuest. The time restrictions are from 2000-2019, covering a total of nineteen years. Only empirical studies published in journals were considered to ensure quality.

The exclusion criteria involved other variables aside from language learning such as age, gender, personality type, learning strategies, and general academic achievement. Studies involving other relevant concepts about self-esteem such as self-concept and also self-evaluation were eliminated. Only studies that specifically pertained to the term *self-esteem* were considered as the primary material.

After the said exclusions, 20 studies thus remained for full-text analysis. Thematic grouping based on the studies' respective objectives was implemented which resulted to three emerging patterns: self-esteem and language skills, self-esteem and language proficiency, as well as self-esteem and other emotional variables within the language classroom.

Governed by ethical research procedures, the researcher affirms that the results presented are free from the outcome and confirmatory biases. This current study specifically only aims to describe the developments and trends on the correlation between self-esteem and language learning, and therefore does not intend to answer affirm any research hypothesis.

Table 1: An overview of the original studies on self-esteem and language learning arranged chronologically by date of publication

Study	Objective	Main Outcome Measures	Results
Hassan (2001)	To investigate the relationship between self-esteem and	English Apprehension Questionnaire, Writing Foreign	self-esteem is negatively correlated with writing

	writing apprehension	Language Self-Esteem Scale, 40-min writing task	apprehension
Hayati & Ostadian (2008)	To find out the relationship between self-esteem and achievement in second language acquisition	model test of TOEFL, 34 audio conversations, 34 written form tests, Coopersmith's Self-esteem questionnaire (1967)	students' listening comprehension is influenced significantly by their self-esteem
Maleki & Mohammadi (2009)	To investigate the extent of anxiety and self-esteem in performing oral communication tasks	Zung's Self-rating anxiety scale, Coopersmith's Self-esteem questionnaire (1967), two conversation tasks	The successful learners had higher self-esteem compared to the less successful ones in performing the tasks of oral communication
Soureshjani & Naseri (2011)	investigates the relationship between self-esteem and proficiency level in the EFL classroom	Reading comprehension placement test, Coopersmith's Self-esteem questionnaire (1967)	there is a strong positive relationship between self-esteem and proficiency level
Koosha et al. (2011)	investigates the relationships between self-esteem and speaking skills	a modified version of Farhady et al. speaking scale (1995), Sorensen's Self-esteem scale (2005)	self-esteem only significantly affects the fluency factor
Pramita (2012)	examines the possible contribution of self-esteem to the students' English proficiency	self-designed Students' Self-esteem questionnaire, Oxford's Strategy Inventory of Language Learning (1990), Heinkel's TOEFL Prediction Test (2005)	there a positive and significant relationship between self-esteem and proficiency
Zare & Riasati (2012)	explores the relationship between language learning anxiety, self-esteem, and academic level	Horwitz' Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (1986), Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (1965)	concludes that learning anxiety decreased as self-esteem increased
Fahim & Rad (2012)	investigates the relationship between self-esteem and paragraph writing	TEOFL actual test (2003), Coopersmith's Self-esteem questionnaire (1967), expository writing activity	a positive relationship is found between self-esteem and paragraph writing scores
Bagheri & Fahri (2012)	investigates the relationship between self-esteem and reading	Hyde's Questionnaire of Self-esteem (1979), revised Eysenek Personality Questionnaire (1985),	there is a positive relationship between self-esteem and reading

	comprehension	TEOFL Reading comprehension test	comprehension
Takahashi & Takahashi (2013)	investigates whether or not self-esteem was related to self-perceived English ability, the strength of motivation for learning English, and actual English proficiency	Hassan's Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale (2001), Ely's Strength of motivation scale (1986), Kitano's modified Can-Do scale (2001)	students with higher levels of self-esteem have higher motivation towards learning English
Kalazandeh, et al (2013)	investigates the relationship between the EFL intermediate students speaking skills and their self – esteem	Oral Proficiency Test, of Farhady et al. speaking scale (1995), Marsh & Herbert's Self-esteem questionnaire (2007)	there is a statistically significant correlation between the students' verbal performance and their self – esteem
Tilfarlioglu (2014)	investigates the relationship between self-esteem, attitude, self-regulation, and foreign language achievement (FLA)	adapted Rosenberg's Self-esteem questionnaire (1965), Brown et. al's Self-Regulation questionnaire (1999), adapted Karahan's (2007) language attitude questionnaire	there is a positive relationship between participants' self-esteem and their foreign language achievement
Wullur (2014)	investigates the correlation between self-esteem and speaking ability	Wenas' Self-esteem questionnaire (2002), speaking test	self-esteem has a positive, and strong correlation with grammar, positive moderate correlation with pronunciation, vocabulary, and positive and weak correlation with fluency
Piran (2014)	investigates the possible correlation between three Selves (self-esteem, self-concept, and self-efficacy) and reading self-esteem	Campbell's Self-concept attribute attitude scale (1991), Ghonsooly & Elahi's self-efficacy questionnaire (2010), Marsh's Self-esteem questionnaire (2007)	reading comprehension grades are correlated with self-esteem
Basco & Han (2016)	investigates the level of self-esteem, anxiety, and motivation according to English proficiency level	self-designed questionnaire for self-esteem, motivation, and anxiety	there is a strong negative correlation between self-esteem and a positive correlation between self-esteem and motivation

Dev & Qiqieh (2016)	examines the relationship between self-esteem, English Language proficiency, and academic achievement	Rosenberg's Self-esteem questionnaire (1965),	no significant relationship is found among the variables. Furthermore, language proficiency (IELTS) has no direct impact on the students' self-esteem
Alrabai, F. (2017)	examines the level of self-esteem and its correlation to achievement in the English Language	Hassan's Foreign Language Self-esteem Scale (2001), achievement tests	there is a strong positive correlation between the self-esteem and achievement in especially in the English Language
Mandokhail et al (2018)	investigates the relationship between self-esteem and oral proficiency	Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale (1965), oral performances	there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and his oral proficiency
Moriya (2019)	investigates the self-esteem of students learning English and investigated the background of their low and high self-esteem evaluations	self-designed questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, data recordings, memos	finds that students' self-esteem is not so high because their extremely ambitious learning goals tended to be beyond their limits (RQ1), that low self-esteem resulted from the interaction between emotions and situations (RQ2), and that to cope with such low self-esteem
Satriani (2019)	investigates the correlation between self-esteem and speaking performance in an EFL classroom	speaking test (role play), adapted Coopersmith Self-Esteem inventory (1978)	there is a moderate, positive, and significant relationship between self-esteem and English speaking competencies
Total	20		

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Implementing a thematic categorization based on the studies' objectives, the articles were then grouped accordingly into three main trends: studies about self-esteem and language skills, studies about self-esteem and second and/or foreign language proficiency and achievement, and studies about the relationship between self-esteem and other emotional variables within the language learning classroom.

Self-Esteem and Language Skills

It has long been theorized that self-esteem has some influence over a learner's language skills. Indeed, the majority of the studies conducted from the 2000s mainly focused on proving this particular connection. The studies concord that generally, a significant relationship between self-esteem and speaking skills is found (Maleki & Mohammadi, 2009; Kalazandeh, et al, 2013; Wullur, 2014; Mandokhail, 2018). The study conducted by Maleki & Mohammadi (2009) discovers that students with higher self-esteem tend to have better performance in their oral communication tasks. In a similar research study Mandokhail et al (2018), found that a significant relationship between student's self-esteem and their speaking skills exists. In their research, Kalazandeh et. al (2013) revealed that learners with high self-esteem, generally, are involved more actively in conversations and other spoken activities such as oral production in the target language. Besides, Wullur (2014) found that self-esteem affects various oral proficiency aspects. According to the results of his research, self-esteem has a strong positive correlation with grammar, a moderate correlation with vocabulary and pronunciation, and a weaker correlation with fluency. More recently, Satriani's (2019) study found that there is a significant, positive and moderate relationship between the level of students' self-esteem with their English speaking capabilities.

The same effects have been observed between self-esteem and reading comprehension. In research conducted by Piran (2014), it was found that reading comprehension grades are positively correlated with students' high self-esteem. Additionally, Bagheri & Faghih (2012) discovered that both situational and task self-esteem are positively correlated to reading comprehension, while global self-esteem has no significant relationship with reading comprehension.

A few studies focused on self-esteem and writing. For instance, Fahim & Rad (2012) revealed that paragraph writing scores are positively affected by self-esteem, and self-esteem and English language proficiency are positively related. Hassan (2001) discovered that there is a negative correlation between writing apprehension and self-esteem: those who possessed a higher degree of self-esteem wrote better compositions.

One study focused on self-esteem and listening comprehension. Hayati & Ostadian (2008) revealed that self-esteem influences listening comprehension positively. Students with high self-esteem consider themselves as more capable in understanding the audio material if it is compared to those with lower self-esteem.

Self-esteem and Second/Foreign Language Proficiency and Achievement

Self-esteem generally correlates positively with both Second and Foreign Language Proficiency and Achievement (Soureshjani & Naseri, 2011; Pramita, 2012; Tilfarlioglu & Delbesoglulil, 2014; Alrabai, 2017). Soureshjani & Naseri (2011)'s research results found that there is a significant, weak correlation between self-esteem and reading comprehension, while a positive, strong relationship between self-esteem and proficiency levels of students.

Tilfarlioglu & Delbesoglulil (2014) concur that self-esteem and foreign language achievement has a medium positive correlation. Alrabai (2017) found that students' self-esteem influences their performance and achievement in a foreign language course.

However, the findings from Dev & Qiqieh's (2016) study deviate from the other results. The results indicated that no significant relationship between language achievement and self-esteem is found. Furthermore, there is also no significant relationship between students' language proficiency scores and their self-esteem ratings.

Self-esteem and other emotional variables

The remaining studies involve the relationship between self-esteem and other emotional variables, mainly focusing on self-esteem and anxiety, as well as self-esteem and motivation (Zare & Riassati, 2012; Takahashi & Takahashi, 2013; Basco & Han, 2016; Moriya, 2019) within the language classroom. The results of the studies on self-esteem and

anxiety generally concur that a strong negative correlation between the two is found. In the study conducted by Zare & Riassati (2012), it was found that there was a high negative correlation between the two variables. Learners with a high degree of self-esteem had lower learning anxiety. Zare & Riassati (2012) accounted for this to the number of experienced students have in learning the language. The more experience and exposure a student has in learning the language, the lower the level of the anxiety.

Basco & Han's (2016) study concur with the latter research's findings. A negative correlation was also found between the variables; thus students who rated themselves higher in the self-esteem scale had lower anxiety in the language classroom.

On the other hand, it was also found that self-esteem has a strong positive correlation with motivation. The same study conducted by Basco & Han (2016) also found a strong, positive relationship between self-esteem and motivation. In this case, the students who rated themselves as having a higher degree of self-esteem also had the higher motivation. Takahasi & Takahashi (2013) found that a high motivation in learning the language was positively influenced by high levels of self-esteem. Furthermore, students' high self-esteem positively affected the learners' confidence in the use of the language thereby facilitating learning. In a similar study done by Moriya (2019), he found that students with a higher degree of motivation also perceived their English proficiency as better than others.

CONCLUSION

Following the keyword search, inclusion and exclusion criteria and relevancy analysis, the studies included for full-text analysis were categorized according to their respective objectives. Three apparent trends emerged from this thematic grouping: studies on self-esteem and its relationship with language skills, studies on self-esteem and second and/or foreign language proficiency, and studies on self-esteem and other emotional variables within the language learning context.

The studies that focused on self-esteem and language skills generally concur that there is a significant relationship between self-esteem and the development of the four language skills namely speaking, writing, reading, and listening.

Likewise, self-esteem has a strong, positive relationship with second/foreign language proficiency. In this regard, students with higher self-esteem are found to be more generally involved in their learning and the activities done in the language classroom. Furthermore, students who are more experienced in learning the target language and those who have already reached a higher language proficiency proved to have lower levels of anxiety.

Among the studies that involved other emotional variables in the language classroom context, it was found that anxiety and motivation are among those which are mostly related to self-esteem. While motivation is positively correlated to self-esteem, anxiety is negatively correlated. This implies that learners with higher self-esteem reporting to have lower anxiety in the language classroom.

While the question of the direction of causation between self-esteem and achievement remains irresolvable, the results of this analysis show that majority of the research findings imply a positive correlation between self-esteem and language skills, language proficiency, and other emotional variables in the language classroom. Hence, regardless of whether it is self-esteem that affects achievement or the other way around, it cannot be said that the value of self-esteem can be disregarded in the field of language learning.

These results are value-adding to the research on self-esteem within the language learning context, especially because the studies involved in this analysis are all recent. This informs educators of the current development and status of self-esteem with regards to language learning from which appropriate actions may be implemented.

Furthermore, since the resulting trends from the analysis have already been identified, future researchers may explore other areas of interest regarding the same topic. Given this, general awareness about the importance of self-esteem must be communicated to administrators, educators, and students. The administrators have the unique role of crafting, contextualizing, and individualizing the content of the curriculum to be used in the language learning classroom.

Teachers are at the forefront of the learning process. Since they are the primary authority in the classroom, they are expected to promote a classroom that protects the students' self-esteem. Teachers must be able to foster a competitive yet conducive atmosphere that is free of negative appraisals which are proven to be detrimental to language learning. Feedback also plays a significant factor in promoting healthy self-esteem among students. It must be grounded, realistic, and constructive, acknowledging the students' efforts and results. While it is important to recognize the efforts and achievements of students, the excessive use of praise in the classroom can have a detrimental effect to language learning as it might lead to false beliefs about oneself and unrealistic goal setting.

Language counselling is a recommendation for tracking individualized student progress. It is one of the most realistic ways for language teachers to track a student's progress. Language counselling programs are mostly cooperative efforts between teachers and students, which reflect a more balanced view of the language learning process.

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