Self-Esteem and Oral Communicative Language Proficiency in the Puerto Rican Teaching-Learning Process

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Abstract

This study investigated the self-esteem, self-evaluations in the ESL classroom (S-eESL), and oral communicative language proficiency of 7 first year students in one of the campuses of the University of Puerto Rico. The research explored possible relationships among the three variables. It followed a descriptive case study approach that analyzed both qualitative and quantitative data. A review of the literature and previous experience with teachers and students indicated that positive self-esteem leads students to improve their language learning capacity. The researcher decided to explore and investigate these assumptions in a three-year research period.

**Key words:** global self-esteem, self-evaluation, oral communicative language proficiency

Abstracto

El presente estudio investigó la autoestima, las autoevaluaciones en el aula de aprendizaje del inglés como segundo idioma (S-eESL), y la competencia lingüística en la comunicación oral de siete estudiantes de primer año en uno de los recintos de la Universidad de Puerto Rico. La investigación exploró las posibles relaciones entre estas tres variables. Se siguió un acercamiento descriptivo al estudio de casos que analizó datos cualitativos y cuantitativos. Un examen de la literatura y de la experiencia previa de maestros y estudiantes indicó que una autoestima positiva lleva a los estudiantes a mejorar su capacidad de aprender idiomas. La investigadora decidió explorar e investigar estos supuestos durante un periodo de tres años.

**Palabras clave:** autoestima global, autoevaluación, habilidad oral de lengua comunicativa

This article is an abridgement of a 1996 doctoral thesis by Carmen Rosa Hernandez Nogueras. She passed away in 1999. Her colleague, Lourdes Encarnacion Conde, one of the peer-reviewers of Glossa, requested that it be published in her memory.
Introduction

Self-esteem has long been the subject of research among educators, psychologists, and sociologists. The great amount of research related to self-esteem reported in reference sources such as ERIC and PsycINFO evidences this. The Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) contains over 12,000 entries with titles in the area of self-esteem and other related areas such as self-perception, self-concept, and self-image.

PsycINFO, a database produced by the American Psychological Association, includes over 92,000 entries in the areas of self-concept, self-esteem, and self-perceptions. However, only 143 of these entries relate to self-esteem and language acquisition or second language learning. In fact, PsycINFO specifically lists only 24 studies relating self-concept or self-esteem to foreign and English language-learning.

According to Brown (1973, 1994), second language acquisition is influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic affective factors that contribute to the success of language learning. The intrinsic factor of self-esteem has been reported as one of the personality factors present during any cognitive or affective activity in the second language classroom. Other intrinsic factors are the capability for risk-taking, inhibition, motivation, and anxiety. Systematic study of the role of these factors has already brought a greater understanding of language acquisition as well as improvement of teaching methodology.

The extrinsic factors of affectivity include socio-cultural variables resulting from the second language learner’s experiences of learning two languages and two cultures. In other words, both personality and socio-cultural factors contribute greatly to the success of language learning (Schumann & Schumann, 1977).
Second language acquisition researchers such as Brown (1994) and Heyde (1977, 1983) have reported that psychologists categorize self-esteem into global self-esteem, situational or specific self-esteem, and task self-esteem. According to Brown, global self-esteem derives from the accumulation of inter and intrapersonal experiences, and from assessments people make of the external world. Situational or specific self-esteem deals with one’s personal appraisals in certain life events. The degree of situational self-esteem may vary according to the situations a person confronts. Social interactions such as work, education, and home, or traits such as oral ability, intelligence, or flexibility make up the bulk of situational or specific self-esteem. Task self-esteem refers to the evaluations one makes of specific situations. An example of task self-esteem in the language area is one’s self-evaluation of a particular aspect of the acquisition process such as speaking, writing, reading, a specific ESL class, or even a special kind of language drill.

As seen, self-esteem is an important variable in second language acquisition (Brown, 1994). It is a very significant factor because no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of it. Students perform well when they have high global self-esteem, or they may have a high global self-esteem because they perform well.

Heyde (1977, 1983) explored the relationships between the three levels of self-esteem and students’ oral performance in second language. She found that all three levels of self-esteem correlated positively with oral performance. The highest correlation occurred between task self-esteem and oral language performance. Therefore, she concurred with Brown (1980) in that oral language performance has a strong bearing upon global self-esteem.

Heyde’s (1983) study involved 181 American learners using French. Students had to evaluate their worthiness in situations where they were using French and their performance
before and after an extemporaneous speech in French. Two types of task self-esteem evaluated were errors and comparisons. Errors task self-esteem referred to the evaluations learners made of their performance on a speech based on a general rating of errors they thought they had made. Comparison task self-esteem consisted of the evaluations learners made comparing their expected performance on a speech with the expected performance of other students in their classes. Both types of task self-esteem were measured before and after the learners performed the task.

Self-esteem is always a significant factor in the level of accomplishment of all students (Alatorre, 1993; Ausubel & Robinson, 1969; Beane & Lipka, 1984; Morse, 1964; Nine-Curt, 1993; Patterson, 1973; Purkey, 1970; Reasoner, 1992). According to these researchers, if students have high perceptions of themselves in the classroom, they will study harder to obtain high grades. Students with high global self-esteem most likely believe themselves to be significant and worthy individuals as well as capable of learning another language (Brown, 1994; Nine-Curt, 1988; Schumann & Schumann, 1977). On the other hand, students who feel they do not have the ability to learn a second language usually have low global self-esteem (Heyde, 1977). If students have a low global self-esteem, they will probably get low grades, if not fail altogether in school. As lack of success continues in the second language learning experiences, the students may develop low S-eESL about their second language abilities. Eventually they may even become dropouts (Clayton, 1986; Nine-Curt, 1993; Reasoner, 1992). High self-esteem can be associated with successful language acquisition while conversely, low self-esteem may be associated with students whose language acquisition is less successful.

**Purpose of the Study**
The purpose of this study was to investigate the relationships among students’ self-esteem, their self-esteem in the ESL classroom (S-eESL), and oral communicative language proficiency. The researcher selected oral communicative language proficiency in ESL because affective variables related to second language acquisition are easier to observe in interpersonal oral communications than when reading or writing in a second language (Guiora, Brannon, & Dull, 1972).

The research questions this study addresses are the following:

1. What is the global self-esteem of the ESL students participating in the study?
2. What is the students’ self-esteem in the ESL classroom (S-eESL)?
3. What level of oral communicative language proficiency do they have?
4. Are there any relationships among global self-esteem, S-eESL, and oral communicative language proficiency?

**Methodology**

The guidelines and parameters were delineated and data were collected through various instruments. The Ramos-Perea Self-Report Self-esteem Instrument, which measures Puerto Rican students’ self-concept, was followed in this research by the Heyde Self-esteem Instrument, which assesses self-evaluation of students in situations in which they use English. An adapted version of the Bachman-Palmer Oral Interview Test for Communicative Proficiency in English was used to appraise oral ESL proficiency. In-depth interviews conducted in Spanish were used to record the students’ experiences in learning English. In addition, participants were also asked to write in Spanish about experiences in their English
classes at college as well as their recommendations on improving the teaching of English in Puerto Rico.

Theoretical Foundation

This research on the relationship of self-esteem to second language learning was based on Krashen’s (1987) Monitor Model, a widely discussed theoretical model of language acquisition. Krashen’s Monitor Model postulates five hypotheses. The affective filter hypothesis is the one relevant to the objectives of this research.

The affective filter hypothesis states the relationship between affective variables and the process of second language learning. Affective variables related to success in second language learning may be placed into one of three categories: (a) motivation, (b) self-confidence, and (c) anxiety. Furthermore, the affective filter hypothesis posits that acquirers vary with respect to the strength or level of their affective filters. In other words, when the learners’ attitudes are not optimal for second language acquisition, they tend to receive less comprehensible input because the filter blocks the input. Consequently, according to Krashen, this input will not reach that part of the brain responsible for language acquisition, even if students do understand the message, simply because these learners will also have a high or strong affective filter. However, those learners with attitudes more conducive to second language acquisition will not only be more receptive to obtaining comprehensible input, they will also have a lower or weaker filter.

Second language acquisition can be stimulated by providing a positive and encouraging social environment in the classroom. Teachers may provide comprehensible input in their classrooms as long as they encourage low anxiety in the learning situation and deliver the input in a warm and supporting environment (Krashen, 1987). Consequently, the language learner
will have a lower filter and will be more open to comprehensible input which contributes to success in second language acquisition.

**Theoretical Assumptions**


The first assumption is that self-esteem grows, is shaped, and changes according to an individual’s life experiences (Corsini, 1994). Brown (1994) indicates that “personality development involves the growth of a person’s concept of the self, acceptance of the self, and reflection of the self as seen in the interaction between the self and others” (p. 136). Personal growth also involves essential qualities such as linguistic ability and ethical and moral values (Ashton & Webb, 1986). Coopersmith (1967), Husen and Postlethwaite (1985), James (1923), and Rogers (1980) have agreed that an individual’s concept of self that includes self-awareness, thoughts, feelings, and behavior are influenced by factors such as environment, values, beliefs, and maturation. The concept learners have of themselves in every situation is determined by what they are experiencing at the moment and the beliefs they have brought to the situation (Stanford & Roark, 1974). The personality traits or features of a person’s self-esteem are socially and gradually developed through the interaction with others. Physical, moral, economic, social, cognitive, and emotional factors are present in all of the experiences that help form an individual’s personality. Therefore, learning can be enhanced through positive experiences that may improve self-esteem.
The second assumption is that high self-esteem affects the learning process. Students with high self-esteem develop ideas and values that enable them to interact more effectively in their social-economical environment (Villarini, 1988). Beane and Lipka (1984) affirm that every positive experience is an opportunity to strengthen self-esteem, help gain more self-confidence, and increase the feelings of self-worth. Students with high self-esteem are willing to learn and work harder in the classroom, and eventually, these students succeed in school. On the other hand, students with low self-esteem tend to perform with less effectiveness and satisfaction, thus, affecting their learning process.

The third assumption concerning self-esteem and second language learning is that a positive learning environment enhances self-esteem. Students who are immersed in a positive language classroom are challenged to learn a new language and attain academic excellence. They develop a strong desire for learning, have high motivation, and set definite goals. Students’ morale and school satisfaction also grow because of the good feeling of achievement or success (Beane & Lipka, 1984).

Teachers, as part of the learning environment, also play an important role in the students’ learning process (Llado, 1984; Patterson, 1973; Purkey, 1970). Wiggins and Chapman (1987) indicate that teachers facilitate students’ personal growth if they are sensitive to the psychological subtleties of interpersonal interaction with students. Students who feel unaccepted by a teacher are unlikely to have a positive degree of self-esteem. When these students do not have an optimal degree of self-esteem, they are, consequently, unable to achieve academically. Patterson (1973) adds that students who feel their self-esteem is threatened by the environment or by teacher perceptions are hindered from learning because meaningful learning entails a basic change in self-esteem.
The fourth assumption regarding self-esteem and second language learning is related to the students’ language ego. Students with high self-esteem develop an adaptive language ego which enables learners to lower inhibitions that may impede success in relation to second language learning (Guiora et al., 1972). They will take risks at speaking a second language even if they do make mistakes. These students will not feel threatened, intimidated, or even frustrated when peers laugh at errors made if they fail to communicate effectively. Moreover, learners with high self-esteem increase their language proficiency and make progress when they are willing to take risks and learn from making mistakes (Brown, 1994).

**Definition of Terms**

**Global Self-esteem.** Global self-esteem is the overall evaluation of worthiness made by the individual which is directly related to the experiences and interactions with his / her environment, interactions with others, and self-perceptions (Coopersmith, 1967; Corsini, 1994; Husen & Postlethwaite, 1985, James, 1923, Rogers, 1980). It is the evaluative feelings of the individual’s personal worth which expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes him or herself to be capable, significant, successful, and worthy (Coopersmith, 1967; Rogers, 1980). This evaluation may vary according to the situations performed (Brown, 1994). In this study, self-esteem was measured using Ramos-Perea’s Self-Report on Self-esteem Instrument (SRSE) (1982).

**Self-esteem in the ESL classroom (S-eESL).** Students’ esteem in the ESL classroom refers to the evaluations students make of themselves in situations where they are using English as a second language, specifically to the evaluations they make of their language learning ability. In this study it was measured using Questions 1, 2, 3, 6, and 7 on Heyde’s Self-esteem Instrument (Heyde, 1977).
**Oral Communicative Language Proficiency.** Oral communicative language proficiency in ESL is defined as the degree of competence that allows the learner to perform linguistically and socio-linguistically in English. In this study it was measured using the Bachman and Palmer’s Oral Interview Test for Communicative Proficiency in English (Bachman & Palmer, 1983).

**Results of the Study**

A Pearson product-moment correlation ($r = 0.05$) was computed to determine all possible pairing of the relationships among the students’ self-esteem, their self-esteem in the ESL classroom, and their oral communicative language proficiency levels. The results indicated there were non-significant pairing relationships. However, the qualitative results of the study revealed a tendency for students’ self-esteem in the ESL classroom (S-eESL) to be more related to ESL proficiency than their global self-esteem. Students with positive S-eESL scores tended to develop a better proficiency in ESL. Another overall finding in the study was that the language-learning environment influenced students’ S-eESL. In cases where the learning environment was negative, English language apprehension was higher. Therefore, participants’ S-eESL varied according to their language-learning environment. The findings also seem to indicate that students may have different S-eESLs. In other words, although students may have high self-esteem, they may have different S-eESLs.

To recap, an analysis of the findings infers that there exists a nonsignificant positive relationship between S-eESL and language proficiency for participants in this study ($r = 0.456$, $p < 0.05$). In addition, there seemed to be a nonsignificant negative correlation between self-esteem and S-eESL ($r = -0.495$) as well as between self-esteem and language proficiency (-0.189). When
comparing the students’ language learning histories with the obtained data, the findings indicated that when experiences were positive, S-eESL was also positive. The participants’ S-eESL also varied according to the language-learning environment.

**Implications**

The findings in this study indicate the importance that family, teachers, peers, and community have in developing self-esteem. It is only with the positive influence of all that students will be able to participate actively and productively in the language learning process. The first implication of this study is that parents, teachers, and the community need to be aware of the importance of developing positive social interactions with the students. The participants in this study expressed they had learned many positive values from their parents which helped them interact positively in and with the community. Inclusively, their parents had an influence on their learning process. Likewise, interactions in the community helped strengthen values and beliefs as participants reported in their histories. Community, home, school, and peers are important factors in the assertiveness and growth of students’ self-esteem. Parents, teachers, peers, and the community may contribute to encourage both self-esteem and learning self-esteem. Likewise, as students develop higher self-esteem and S-eESL, they will be motivated to learn in ways that will help them develop higher proficiency in English.

Self-esteem may be channeled into active learning and consequently may generate good school performance (Huang, 1992; Coopersmith, 1967) whereas low self-esteem may lead to low academic achievement and deviant behavior (Higgins, 1987). Students’ self-esteem will also evolve. As Curran (1976) states, this change will occur as they learn more of the language and become more responsible for their learning. Another implication of this study is that self-esteem varies according to the experiences in the language learning environment.
Participants seemed to internalize the affective aspects in the language learning environment created by teacher and peer interaction. Therefore, teachers must be facilitators in an atmosphere where the students feel they are accepted and respected (Combs, 1962). Combs (1962) emphasizes that “the adequate classroom must be an environment in which the student finds himself / herself accepted with warmth and friendliness and in which he is helped through planned experiences to satisfy his / her need to know about himself / herself and his world. It is an environment in which vigorous and healthy growth toward adequacy can be achieved” (p. 97). The last implication is that teachers need to be aware of, not only the cognitive domain, but also the affective domain. If the teacher is not aware of the students’ feelings, needs, emotions, culture, willingness to communicate, or other factors that affect a positive interaction between students and teacher, communication will be negatively affected. This is in accordance with Baez’ (1993) findings on communication apprehension and self-esteem among Puerto Rican college students. He stated that ESL teachers’ major concern should be the creation of a classroom environment which promotes open communication and, at the same time improves the levels of self-esteem of their students. Teachers also need to be sensitive to the backgrounds and experiences of their students. When students with a high self-esteem are motivated, strengthened, and challenged during the teaching learning experience, they strive to succeed in learning; thus, improving language proficiency. This agrees with Patterson (1973) who stated that a high self-esteem produces confidence which allows students to develop a desire to communicate. By the same token, students with low self-esteem will perform with less efficacy and satisfaction because they have developed feelings of being nonself-worthy and a failure. A clearer application and relevance of self-esteem must be made as it relates to educational psychology, and specifically to the classroom. Hattie (1992) stated that despite the
tremendous amount of research, which could imply that self-esteem must be among the most important constructs in people’s lives, this importance still needs to be placed into perspective. She adds that educators and psychologists must discuss the relationship of self-esteem with the language acquisitional process without overlooking the other physical and sociological factors which influence the learning process as well as self-esteem.

Conclusions

The study revealed that parents, teachers, peers, community, and environment, in general, were important factors for the participants in the study. The participants indicated in their oral interviews that parents taught them positive values such as love, egalitarianism, respect, harmony, equality, family-ties, and affectivity. In addition, some participants accredited their parents for teaching them the value of being an educated person. Teachers and peer support were also meaningful for the participants as inferred from their language learning histories. Teachers who established an affective learning environment motivated the students’ participation and liking of English. When affective interaction seemed to be lacking between teachers and participants, these reported feeling insecure, nervous, and threatened in the classes. This finding agrees with Wiggins and Chapman (1987) who state that teacher interpersonal interaction with participants in the classroom has the potential to either prevent or enhance an affective environment.

Positive or negative self-esteem, learning esteem in the ESL classroom, and oral communicative language proficiency are greatly influenced by many variables as previously mentioned. Other factors such as positive or negative learning conditions and or school environment added to the pleasure or the rejection of learning English. In conclusion, the
results of this study verified Eckert’s (1992) findings that language learning takes place in an affective and supportive classroom environment.

**Recommendations**

The results, conclusions, and implications of this study lead the researcher to make the following recommendations.

1. More emphasis should be placed on encouraging activities, specifically in educational settings, which induce positive interactions among students, parents, teachers, and the community.

2. More importance should be given to the development of affective objectives that lead to classroom activities which may encourage high S-eESL.

3. Educational systems should consider in-service training that leads teachers to greater understanding of how self-esteem, in general, and S-eESL may affect second language learning.

4. Educators should develop educational material which may strengthen learning in meaningful contexts at the same time that self-esteem in the ESL classroom is encouraged.

5. Finally, further research should be conducted with regard to oral communicative language proficiency as it is related to S-eESL. A replication of this study with a larger population could be a variation of it.

Educators, students, parents, and the community in general must join in the effort to encourage positive interactions which may lead to high self-esteem, regardless of individual or cultural differences. Parents, communities, and educators must work together to enhance the opportunities for students to believe in themselves, to show that they are capable of learning,
and to succeed not only in language learning, but in every phase of their lives. Teaching methodology, research on second language acquisition, and research on psycholinguistics must go hand in hand to help form a confident language learner. Clearly, a major educational aim should be to strengthen self-esteem at the same time language learning is encouraged.

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