The Relationship between Self-esteem and Listening Comprehension of EFL Students

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Abstract

The present study is aimed at investigating the relationship between self-esteem and listening comprehension of EFL students. Sixty intermediate students (30 male and 30 female) from Shahid Tondgouyan Petroleum University of Abadan, Iran, were selected using a sample proficiency test. Students' English language listening comprehension scores were calculated using a model test of TOEFL, including 34 audio conversations and 34 written form tests, and their self-esteem was estimated using Coopersmith (1967)'s questionnaire. The results showed that the students' listening comprehension was significantly affected by their self-esteem; that is, self-esteem as a psychological factor had a positive relationship with students' English language listening comprehension.

Key words: Self-esteem, Listening Comprehension, Proficiency, Language

Learning

Abstracto

El propósito de este estudio es investigar la relación entre la autoestima y la comprensión auditiva de los alumnos que estudian el inglés como idioma extranjero. 60 estudiantes intermedios (30 mujeres y 30 hombres) de la Shahid Tondgouyan Petroleum University en Abadan, Irán, fueron seleccionados utilizando un examen piloto de destrezas. Las puntuaciones en su comprensión auditiva del inglés fueron calculadas utilizando una prueba modelo del TOEFL, que incluye 34 conversaciones en audio y 34 pruebas escritas. La autoestima de los estudiantes fue calculada utilizando el cuestionario de Coopersmith (1967). Los resultados mostraron que la comprensión auditiva de los estudiantes se afectó significativamente dependiendo de su nivel de autoestima. Es decir, la autoestima como factor psicológico mantuvo una relación positiva con la comprensión auditiva del inglés de los estudiantes.

Palabras claves: *auto estima, comprensión que escucha, habilidad, aprendizaje de idiomas*

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Introduction

In 1940s, listening comprehension was investigated as a new field of investigation in the realm of language learning following the works of researchers such as Brown and Nichols (Feyton, 1991). Chastain (1988) believes that understanding and speaking a language can be achieved primarily by hearing native speakers' conversations. Many works performed by researchers suggest that language can be acquired through exposure to authentic input, which can mostly be achieved through listening (Carter & Nunan, 2001, p. 8).

On the other hand, a number of studies have suggested that learning, in general, cannot be achieved without careful consideration to psychological factors (Carter & Nunan, 2001; Derville, 1966). In all educational environments, students get different grades. Some believe that they get either higher or lower grades than expected to. Most of these problems are closely related to psychological factors out of which self-esteem is an overwhelming issue that has determining effects on language learning, specifically listening comprehension. What all this points to is that the importance of self-esteem as a crucial factor affecting motivation should not be underestimated. It could be claimed that no activity will be carried out successfully without self-esteem (Huitt, 2004; see also Brown, 1994; Heyde, 1979; Khodadad, 2003; Powers & Sanchez, 1982).

A lot of studies have been carried out on the effects of self-esteem on language learning in general terms (Kamarzarrin, 1994; Demo & Parker, 1987; Khodadad, 2003,

among others). These studies reveal that the role of self-esteem as a psychological variable in language learning has been underestimated. Demo and Parker (1987) believe that in real situations both self-esteem and language learning are interacting variables, in the sense that language learning can affect the degree of self-esteem and vice versa; that is to say, by strengthening one, the other factor will be strengthened.

In a study carried out by Heyde (1979), three kinds of self-esteem, global or general, situational or specific and task self-esteem had equal and positive effects on oral production of American students learning French as a foreign language. The effects of self-esteem on high school students' learning in Dezfoul (Kamarzarrin, 1994) suggested that students with low self-esteem were faced with problems in general learning.

In the light of the above considerations, the present study is an attempt to verify the relationship between self-esteem and listening comprehension of Iranian EFL learners. The present research enjoys one more issue, i.e. gender, which was rarely considered in the previous studies.

Methodology

Participants

The subjects of the study were 60 intermediate students of Shahid Tondgouyan Petroleum University, in Abadan, Iran. In this university, the courses related to oil industry are presented in English, so the students are taught in English. In order to choose the subjects, a sample proficiency test was administered so that among a large number of students (150), the participants were selected. The criterion for participant selection was the scores of students in the middle range. That is, scores between 35 and 52 ($\bar{x} \pm$ standard deviation). Eighty five students (39 females and 46 males) were considered as intermediate students among whom two groups of male and female students, each consisting of 30

members were randomly selected as the main subjects of the study. To avoid any sensitivity, all the students took part in the subjects of the subsequent evaluations (listening comprehension and self-esteem). They all were 19 to 23 years old.

Instrument

The first instrument in this study was a sample TOEFL proficiency test. Another material was Coopersmith (1967)'s standardized questionnaire of self-esteem, involving 30 questions and each question containing 5 choices all of which were presented in Persian to avoid any confusion for the learners, hence the results tend toward higher reliability. The rationale behind using this model was that it measures both specific and general self-esteem (Huitt, 2004).

The students' English language listening comprehension was evaluated using a new version of standardized TOEFL test (2005), which included thirty four short audio conversations followed by 34 written form tests.

Research Hypotheses

This study consists of the following hypotheses. Each hypothesis is presented along with the analyzed results:

H1: There is no significant relationship between self-esteem (high or low) and the listening comprehension scores of the Iranian EFL students.

H2: There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and the listening comprehension scores of male and female students separately.

Procedure

Based on a sample proficiency test, thirty male and thirty female students were chosen and assigned to two equal groups in terms of numbers. All the students attended two separate warm-up sessions prior to the two tests, i.e. the listening comprehension and self-esteem tests. Before estimating their degree of self-esteem, students were given the tests of listening (TOEFL) so that their English language listening comprehension scores could be determined. As mentioned earlier, the Coopersmith's questionnaire was given to the participants in order to measure their degree of self-esteem. In the self-esteem test, the students had to choose only one of the five options of each question. Coopersmith (1967) mentioned that the questions were graded in the following way. The items 1, 4, 6, 7, 9, 10, 14, 18, 24, 25, 27, 29, and 30 were coded from 5 (high self-esteem) to 1 (low self-esteem); that is, 5 for never, 4 for seldom, 3 for sometimes, 2 for often, and 1 for always. However, the opposite was done for the rest of the questions; that is, they were given rates from 1 (low self-esteem) to 5 (high self-esteem). Then the grades of all of the questions were added in order to obtain a total grade. The total grade that each student received was considered as his/ her self-esteem score. Total self-esteem scores thus could range from 30 to 150. Correlation coefficients between self-esteem and English language listening comprehension scores of the EFL learners were conducted first for the whole sample and then separately in order to inspect and compare the relationship between these variables. The T-test was also run for the equality of the means, first, between the listening grades of male and female learners, and then, between the scores of self-esteem of both male and female students. The mean differences were calculated using the T-test.

Results of Data Analysis

In order to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and the EFL learners' listening comprehension scores, the researchers came to the point where the relationship

between listening comprehension scores and self-esteem was 0.50. The result of the computed correlation coefficient showed that the positive relationship between these two variables was statistically significant. The correlation coefficient was statistically significant at the 0.01 level and the number of subjects was 60; that is the whole sample.

Table 1.
Descriptive Statistics

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Males' Listening Comprehension Scores	14.2333	3.50057	30
Males' Self-esteem	115.9333	5.99962	
Females' Listening Comprehension Scores	19.1333	4.35283	30
Females' Self-esteem	117.7	9.00632	

Males' self-esteem and Listening Comprehension: r=.44
 Females' self-esteem and Listening Comprehension   r=.57

As is seen in Table 1, there is a difference between the mean scores of male and female students' listening comprehension. In order to find out whether it is significant, the t-test was run. The same process was done for the means of male and female students' self-esteem scores. In this table, standard deviation shows the dispersion of all the scores around the mean. It also indicates a higher standard deviation of females' listening comprehension scores than males' which justifies that the deviation of listening comprehension scores in females is larger than that of males'. In other words, males are more homogeneous, though weaker, than females considering their listening comprehension scores. The same tendency was held true about males' and females' self-esteem scores. The larger the students'

deviation, the more variability in the distribution of scores was observed which implied that having compared their self-esteem scores, males are also more homogeneous than females.

Table 2.

The results of t-test for independent samples, comparing male and female students' listening comprehension (LC) and self-esteem (SE) scores.

LC	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Degree of Freedom	T
Males	30	14.2333	3.50057	58	4.425
Females	30	19.1333	4.35283		
		P=.000			
SE					
Males	30	115.9333	5.99962	58	.932
Females	30	117.7	9.00632		
		P= .359			

Table 2 shows a significant difference between male and female students' listening comprehension scores (p=0.000, t= 4.425). The t-scores were computed through the t-formula for comparing the means. Then they were computed with the t-scores of the t-table. The t-scores of listening comprehension scores and self-esteem were respectively higher and lower than the t-scores of the table.

$$t = \frac{\left| \bar{x}_1 - \bar{x}_2 \right|}{\sqrt{\dfrac{f_1^{\,2}}{n_1} + \dfrac{f_2^{\,2}}{n_2}}}$$

$\alpha.05 = 2.04 \qquad t_1 = 4.425 \rangle 2.04$

$$t_2 = 0.932 \langle\ 2.04$$

Therefore, the results showed that gender plays a significant role in intermediate students' self-esteem and listening comprehension. In other words, females' ability to perform English listening comprehension tasks is more than male students. As seen in Table 2, there was no significant difference between male and female students' self-esteem scores (p=0.359, t= -0.932). In other words, they had similar self-esteem levels. The possible reason for such results will be discussed later.

Discussion

The correlation coefficient between self-esteem and EFL students' English language listening comprehension for the whole sample was 0.50 denoting that there was a significant positive relationship between the two factors. Learners with higher levels of self-esteem had higher but students of low self-esteem had lower listening comprehension scores. This can be due to the fact that students with higher self-esteem are expected to do well. These learners are certain of themselves and their abilities. They feel they can succeed in learning English. So, they try much and perform very efficiently while listening to audio tasks. However, students who have lower self-esteem expect to fail. They feel they do not succeed because they do not have the ability to listen to and comprehend English conversations. These groups of students are not certain of their ability to learn English. Therefore, these learners try less and tend to have low listening comprehension.

According to Table 1, the relationship between self-esteem and females' listening comprehension was 0.57. However, the correlation coefficient between self-esteem and listening comprehension scores of the male participants was 0.44. It can be inferred that self-esteem correlated (positively) higher with the listening comprehension scores of females than those of males. This can be attributed to the fact that females are more

precocious than males in emotional development (see Ahadi & Jomehri, 2001). They are more sensitive and are more affected by psychological affairs in learning than males. A female student who has a level of self-esteem similar to that of a male student is more affected by that level of self-esteem. That is, a high self-esteem female performs better in listening comprehension tasks than a male student does, since the former is more affected by emotions and psychological factors ,whereas the latter is more stable in his performance and less influenced by psychological factors, namely self-esteem.

Table 2, shows a significant difference between the means of listening comprehension scores of males and females. It can be inferred that female learners are more successful in listening comprehension tasks than males. Statistics show that in recent years the number of females who entered universities, too, has risen annually. The reason behind this may be due to the fact that compared to girls; boys generally have more freedom in the society. Based on this fact, boys spend more time out of their home and possibly spend the time on things other than study. While, girls are more restricted and possibly have more time to study.

Although individuals affectively prefer success to failure regardless of their levels of self-esteem, they expect their future performance consistent with their self-esteem (McFarlin & Blascovich, 1981, p. 527). That is, high self-esteem subjects predict higher levels of future achievement while low self-esteem individuals expect to fail. Consequently, high self-esteem individuals who need approval will try to succeed in their tasks to present themselves more favorably to others. Knowing that they would exert a great deal of effort and therefore be more certain to succeed may have caused high self-esteem subjects to be more optimistic in their prediction of future tasks.

However, Maruyama, et al. (1981, p. 972) argue that academic achievement is highly stable across time. They state that most social scientists who have viewed

achievement as independent of self-esteem at least have viewed self-esteem as reflecting

past achievement (p. 973). According to these statements, it can be inferred that

psychological and social factors exert little if any influence on academic achievement.

Considering these confusing results, this only points to the fact that achievement and self-

esteem exert no causal influence on each other. Maruyama, Rubin and Kingsbury (1981,

p.973) state that causal relations between achievement and self-esteem may occur during

the first years of school when both self-esteem and achievement are unstable. One possible

explanation for the absence of a direct relationship between achievement and self-esteem is

that subjects in the present study were beyond the ages at which both self-esteem and

achievement are somewhat unstable. Probably, there are reciprocal relations between these

variables at earlier ages but the relationships diminish as children become older and

achievement and self-esteem become stable. However, a favorable self-image leads to

expectations of future success, which in turn produce favorable outcomes on achievement.

One important and unusual finding in this study, compared to the studies discussed

in the introduction, was the equality of means of self-esteem scores of male and female

students. It was supposed that there would be a difference between their scores of self-

esteem. The reason behind this presupposition was that, generally, girls are more sensitive

than boys and therefore pay more attention to their psychological characteristics though

unintentionally. While, boys are generally more confident than girls and this led to the

presupposition that males might have had higher self-esteem scores; however, in the present

study, there was not any significant difference between male and female students' self-

esteem scores.

There may be some possible justifications on the results achieved. One good reason

why such results were achieved can be that in recent years men and women have had

similar rights compared to the past years. As it is known, the number of women working in

offices and factories and studying at universities is getting higher these days. That is because society has found that trusting women like men will result in a better situation. All this process results in a situation that males and females have similar self-views.

Another, and probably more, possible justification of these results is that females used as subjects in this study have different characteristics compared to ordinary females; that is, since the subjects used in the study were chosen from the Petroleum University, it may be inferred that these females have similar characteristics to males. That is because Petroleum courses are mostly suitable for men. These female students have been more confident than ordinary girls and therefore have more self-esteem scores than the girls at the same age. So, regarding their self-esteem, these female learners might have had a similar situation compared to the male ones.

Conclusion

According to the obtained results of the present empirical study, it is stated that:

1. Self-esteem plays an important role in the Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension.

2. Self-esteem has a more important role to play in females' listening comprehension than males'. This may be due to the fact that females are more affected by psychological affairs in language learning than males. Female learners are more capable in English language listening comprehension tasks than male learners.

3. Fourth, males and females have similar self-esteem. This may be due to the fact that female and male students with a similar age range between 19 and 23 have nearly similar positions in society.

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