

*Self-esteem is a central component of human beings. High self-esteem lends to a positive outlook and success while low self-esteem causes a negative outlook and poorer performance. Self-esteem is a crucial element of daily life and especially in classroom situations. This paper explores the significance of self-esteem in the foreign language classroom.*

*Self-esteem is defined as the discrepancy between a student's ideal self - what he would like to be able to achieve, and his self-image - how he sees himself in comparison to his peers. The smaller the discrepancy the greater his self-esteem. Conversely, if there is a large discrepancy between what a student aspires to and what he feels capable of, he will suffer low self-esteem.*

*Anxiety feeds low self-esteem because the anxious student will have a negative or low self-image. Unfortunately anxiety is often present in a foreign language classroom where students must step out of the comfort of their native language and culture.*

*Reducing anxiety and raising self-esteem in the classroom should therefore be of primary concern to language teachers. There is a direct correlation between students' performances and their level of self-esteem. Teachers who create a stress free and positive atmosphere in their classroom can expect higher levels of self-esteem and better overall performances from their students.*

## **Self-Esteem in the Language Classroom**

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Learning a second language in a classroom setting is one of the most difficult mental tasks that a person can undertake. The uncertainty of expressing oneself where the previous linguistic forms of the native language no longer apply leaves most students feeling vulnerable and unconfident. At a time when the student's mind must be functioning as efficiently as possible, more often than not the student is impaired by low self-esteem. In this paper, I examine and emphasize the relationship between self-esteem and success in the foreign language classroom through both personal experience and supporting research. It is my belief that foreign language pedagogy could be made more effective if it greater emphasized encouraging and maintaining a positive and relaxed classroom atmosphere.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

In the course of defining my own language learning style to aid in my effectiveness as a teacher, an extraordinary event occurred that has since directed my thinking and has provided me with my own pedagogical foundation. Before I describe the event, let me briefly describe what preceded it three weeks prior.

I was sitting through a demonstration of the Audio-lingual method for the Approaches course in the Masters of Arts in Teaching program at the School for International Training. I had experienced a fair amount of anxiety because I didn't feel that I could remember or produce the unfamiliar sounds of the Turkish that was being taught if I were to be singled out from the large group of students. Later on in the lesson I humiliated myself because I didn't have enough confidence to volunteer to act out a skit in front of the group, even though I would be coached and assisted with the language. I felt isolated, as if I were the only student who would not have been able to produce any Turkish let alone have the guts to get up in front of the whole group and recite hastily memorized lines. From observations of my students as well as my own subsequent experiences as a language student, my anxiety and feeling of isolation was typical of most language students in a classroom setting.

After three weeks had passed, I thought the Turkish that I had been exposed to was forgotten. Early one morning I was riding my bicycle on a flat section of ground shortly after I crested a steep hill. My breathing and heart rate were almost back down to a comfortable level after the exertion of climbing up the hill, when the following words popped into my head: "Simdilik elli liralik yeter." I had no trouble identifying it as the Turkish from the dialogue, but I couldn't remember what it meant. What a strange sensation to have that particular piece of language pop into my head, completely out of the blue. Even more unfathomable was the fact that I had never intentionally memorized that fragment of Turkish in the first place.

On my way home that day, shortly after riding up a different hill, not actively thinking about anything in particular, the dialogue came to me again. This time it was accompanied by another line, "cok tesekkur ederim."

Over the course of the next few days, I made a conscientious effort to see if I could remember more of the dialogue during my ride. To my amazement, I was able to recall almost all of the remaining lines. Each time I remembered another line or two it occurred shortly after I had crested the steep hills. My physiological and cognitive states were virtually the same each time: I had high self-esteem, my mind was very relaxed, I was feeling positive, and my heart rate and breathing were returning to normal. My thoughts were merely focused on the revolutions of my front tire, not on my attempt to recall the language.

Finally, I dug up my printed copy of the Turkish dialogue to test my accuracy. I was pleased to discover that I was only missing a few words, and the original sequence remained intact.

I realized that when I was on my bike rides, relaxed and free of anxiety, language was retrieved efficiently. In the classroom, this acquisition process was hampered by my low self-esteem, and anxiety

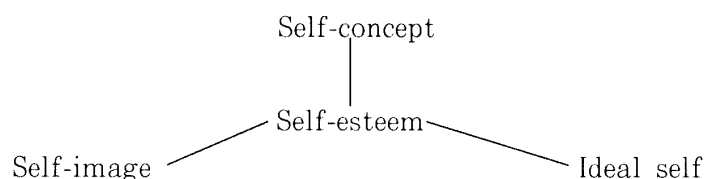
An equally important aspect of this experience is if I had been able to avoid letting my anxiety get the best of me in the first place, I might have stood a better chance of consciously learning the dialogue by more actively participating in the class. How then might I be able to limit my anxiety in a classroom situation?

My anxiety was caused by a lack of self-esteem in my ability to learn another language as well as my self-consciousness to expose my perceived language learning ability to the other members in the class. It's easy to see how anxiety feeds low self-esteem and low self-esteem feeds anxiety.

## DEFINING SELF-ESTEEM

What is self-esteem? This term seems to have many different definitions. It can be confusing to hear the many words that bear the same meaning like self-respect, self-sufficiency, self-concept, self-image, self-confidence, or self-perception. Whatever the term, the discussion is aimed at the psychological underpinnings of an individual's perception of self. To pursue the concept of self-esteem with greater clarity and what role it plays in a language learning scenario, I will work from a paradigm developed by Carl Rogers (1961).

### Self-Concept Paradigm



Self-concept is the umbrella term under which the other three terms reside. It is the whole of an individual's mental and physical self as well as the individual's perception of himself. Self-image is an individual's awareness of his mental and physical characteristics in relation to others. Ideal self is what a person would like to be or aspires to become. Self-esteem is the individual's interpretation and evaluation of the discrepancy between the self-image and ideal self (Lawrence, 1988). The more comfortable a person is with the discrepancy, the higher the self-esteem.

In the Turkish lesson my ideal self wanted to be bold and get up in front of the other students and risk making mistakes in order to learn the language. My self-image, on the other hand, told me that I was in unfamiliar territory. I wouldn't be able to recite the lines because my memory wasn't good enough. I also get nervous speaking in front of people I barely know, even in my native language. My self-esteem in this situation was low because the discrepancy between my ideal self, and self-image was so vast. I was concerned that I would appear an idiot or a fool in front of the other students because I would not be able to speak without a flawed performance. I had isolated myself from the others. My self-esteem in this situation left me feeling as if I were one of a few who could not perform to other's expectations. In reality, however, the other students were most likely experiencing the same mixed emotions caused by the discrepancy between their self-image and ideal self. Those who did get up and muddle through the new sets of sounds provided relief from the anxiety for the rest of us. They were admired for their confidence to perform in a new language, not ridiculed for their long pauses and mistakes.

As I watched the others perform the skit, I realized that my pronunciation and memory for the lines was just as accurate and sometimes better than theirs. I realized that my anxiety marred my self-image. "If a student does not feel that he has the ability to learn a different vocabulary or produce foreign sounds, his acquisition of the new language may be in accordance with his perception" (Parsons, 1983).

After cresting the hills during my bike rides, however, my self image (not being hampered by anxiety) and my ideal self were on par, thus my self-esteem was high. It was precisely at these moments of high self-esteem that the Turkish language dialogues which I could not produce in the classroom situation came freely to me.

It is important to note that a discrepancy between the ideal self and the self-image is quite normal. The key then is what the individual does with this discrepancy. When a student views this discrepancy as a challenge to overcome, she aspires to improve her abilities, and increases her level of knowledge. If a student views it as an impossible chasm, too vast to ever surmount, the discrepancy is destructive and if perpetuated most likely will cause apathy.

The higher the self-esteem, the more confident the student is in social situations and in learning environments. She will be more willing to take risks because she understands that the greater the risk, the greater the potential gain in her ability. A higher self-esteem also yields greater enthusiasm and more confidence in front of peers.

For someone with a low self-esteem the opposite is true. The individual will not be willing to take risks for fear of being humiliated and will avoid situations where she will feel uncomfortable given her level of experience, ability, skill, or knowledge.

## SELF-ESTEEM IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

Self-esteem can be broken down further because one may have a generally strong self-esteem but may not feel particularly competent in certain areas. For example, one may feel incredibly competent in learning a foreign language yet learning physics may seem impossible. Moreover, one may feel confident taking multiple choice grammar tests in a foreign language and at the same time be unwilling to orally produce a sentence using the same grammar and vocabulary in that language.

The use of our native tongue is generally taken for granted. We use it without too much effort to function on a daily basis. Without the use of our native language, we no longer have the ability to communicate and our level of functioning is greatly reduced. This is one of the aspects that makes language learning in a classroom such a formidable task. It means letting go of the familiar linguistic forms and risk being misunderstood until the new sets of forms are learned. Each new step in the acquisition process of another language is on ground unfamiliar to the learner.

This adventure of language learning is a scary, intimidating one, especially for many people who have finally reached a psychological stage in their lives where they feel strong and good about themselves. They aren't accustomed to being in unfamiliar and intimidating territory (Curran, 1976).

Parsons (1983) conducted a study with the premise that the errors made while producing a second language were a reflection about how one felt about their ability to use that language. She wanted to explore the relationship between different levels of self-esteem and their correlation with the oral production by college students enrolled in a beginning level French course. She measured her students' different levels of self-esteem by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale developed by Fitts (1965). Fitts (1972), in a later study concluded that a person with a positive self-concept is likely to be more efficient with his intellectual abilities.

The results of the Parsons (1983) study on the beginning level French course also demonstrated that self-esteem played an important role effecting the learners' acquisition of the language. More importantly, however, it revealed that the teachers could have an effect on certain levels of their students' self-esteem while learning the language. The students who scored the highest on the self-esteem tests fell into groupings by class. The classes that scored highest on the self-esteem tests generally scored the highest on the language tests.

When the learning environment is more cohesive, relaxed, and confident, the learner is more willing to take the risk to acquire new skills in order to meet the demands of learning another language. Acquiring new skills demands change and change is often perceived as risk. Caleb Gattegno (1987) writes, "Skills change us. That is, we shall

have to restructure ourselves in order to be able to do what we were unable to do until then.” The higher one’s self-esteem is, the easier the restructuring process is.

A big aspect of self-esteem is anxiety. Researchers are looking into the effects of anxiety on language learning as well. The language of these studies reflects those on self-esteem. Anxiety is also broken down into different categories according to the degree of specificity. In effect, the researchers are discussing the same thing: fear is a product of a low self-esteem, and anxiety is caused by the realization of the fear. MacIntyre and Gardner (1991: 530) stated:

Comprehension would suffer among anxious students because of the short-term memory loss attributed to anxiety. Production would suffer as well because language anxiety can intrude upon the long-term memory retrieval process.

When teachers raise the self-esteem levels of their students by creating a learning environment that is positive, relaxed and free of anxiety, they are promoting an atmosphere that fosters language acquisition.

## **THEORY AND PRACTICE**

Teaching junior college students in Japan for the last three years has clearly illustrated to me the symbiotic relationship between anxiety, self-esteem and language learning. Because I am a foreigner teaching a foreign language in a foreign style, my students’ anxiety level is very high. I am not only asking them to step out of their familiar language, but also their learned societal roles both as citizens and as students in a society where everything has been highly organized for them. Their self-esteem I would characterize as being fairly typical of most eighteen to twenty year-olds. However, it is greatly dependent on the constraints of Japanese society: the social rules are clear and well defined for everybody and so are the rules of the Japanese classroom. When everyone’s behavior is within the parameters of the individual’s expectations, everyone is in their comfort zone, their self-esteem is intact, and their anxiety level is low. Yet when placed in a native English speaker’s classroom, the culture of the room is as different as the language, they are out of their comfort zone because they no longer know what to expect or what their teacher expects of them. Thus they are not only undergoing linguistic ‘restructuring’ but learning style ‘restructuring’ as well. There are too many unknowns for them to effectively cope with so their anxiety increases and their self-esteem erodes.

I wanted to confirm other researchers’ findings that there was a correlation between

the self-esteem levels of foreign language students and their abilities to learn that language with my own students. I distributed a short questionnaire to one hundred first year students who are enrolled in the English Department at Miyazaki Women's Junior College. There are a few low intermediate level students, but the great majority are characterized as high beginner. Six months prior to the questionnaire, the students were divided into high and low groups based on their performance on a placement test which included a written, a listening, and an interview section. I wondered if a difference in the self-esteem of the two groups would be noticeable.

I asked two questions. 1) "Do you have confidence in yourself?" 2) "Do you have confidence in your ability to learn English?" Both of these questions were aimed at the students' perceptions of themselves, and both of the questions were asked in Japanese as well as English to avoid the possibility of a student not understanding the question either linguistically or culturally. Students were asked to answer on a scale of one to five. One being "a little" and five being "a lot." The questionnaire was anonymous and one hundred percent of the students completed it, fifty participants from each group.

The results did not indicate a notable difference between the two groups based on the question which was geared toward their perception of their general level of self-esteem: "Do you have confidence in yourself?" However, the group with the higher placement test scores rated themselves noticeably higher on the more specific question which was geared toward their perception of their self-esteem to learn English, "Do you have confidence in your ability to learn English?"

## CONCLUSION

The atmosphere in my Approaches class was particularly hectic and tense because a different language was used to demonstrate each different approach to language teaching and the demonstrations were conducted completely in the target language. And with each different approach, there was a different instructor whom we didn't know who was trying to include as much information as possible into their demonstrations. Naturally for many students their anxiety was high. In addition, we knew that the instructors expected us to be able to show that we had not only understood the gist of the approach, but also to show that the approach was effective by being able to reproduce the newly acquired language. To illustrate this point, let me share another anecdote. After a demonstration of Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way by Shokti Gattegno, I asked her why she had chosen me out of sixty-five students to use for the demonstration. She responded, "because I knew you could handle it." She perceived that I was strong enough, in other words she evaluated my self image and judged it to be on par with my ideal-self (high self-esteem). My perception of the task which I was to do in front of a large

group seemed impossible so my self-esteem was actually low. As a result, although I was able to put the sounds together from the sound chart, everyone else in the room understood the meaning of the combined sounds well before I did. In Hindi I said, "My name is Steven."

Obviously this is an extreme example and there is hopefully less anxiety in most classroom situations than there was in my Approaches class, but the point remains that there is a direct correlation between a student's perception of ability to learn language and performance in that language. Above all, as was concluded in the Parsons (1983) study, the teacher is in a position to alter the students' perception of their ability.

The teacher's responsibilities are two fold. First the teacher must lower the level of anxiety in the classroom by creating a comfortable and positive atmosphere. Second, if the teacher is conscious of the students' self-esteem, the teacher can strategically lower the students' perception of the difficulty of the tasks, and at the same time incorporate tasks that are specifically designed to increase self-image. Thus the gap between the ideal self and self-image is narrowed. This effectively enhances self-esteem and simultaneously increases one's ability to acquire a foreign language.

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[Received December 10, 1996]