



Whether Positive Global Self-Esteem Can Facilitate Second Language Acquisition?

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Abstract

Affective factors are universally acknowledged to play an important role in Second Language Acquisition, but those factors, with a rather wide range, have to be tested one by one so that how relevant each one is to SLA can be discovered. The present study focuses on one of them – self-esteem, which is believed an influential factor in affective domain. Through a case study, complete with questionnaires and interviews, it is believed that there is no relevant proof that the positive global self-esteem can facilitate the second language acquisition.

Key words: Affective factors; Self-esteem; Global self-esteem

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1. RESEARCH QUESTION

Language acquisition in both first and second language is one of the most impressive and fascinating aspects of human development. Many of us believe that learners in second language acquisition have certain characteristics that will lead to more or less successful language learning. And it is certainly does. All normal children, given a normal upbringing, are successful in their acquiring their first language. But as for second language learners, their success varies greatly. So there must be such

characteristics that make this great difference. But such beliefs are usually based on anecdotal evidence, often our own experience or that of individual people we have known. One of the factors generally considered to be relevant to language learning is personality characteristics. Personality characteristics within a person contribute in some way to the success of language learning. Self-esteem is one of the important facets. It has two ways of further dividing. One is further defined as positive self-esteem and low self-esteem; and the other is divided as global self-esteem, specific self-esteem and task self-esteem.

Self-esteem is probably the most pervasive aspect of any human behavior. It could be easily claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem. Malinowski (1923) noted that all human beings have a need for phatic communion – defining oneself and finding acceptance in expressing that self in relation to valued others. Personality development universally involves the growth of a person's concept of self, acceptance of self, and reflection of self as seen in the interaction between self and others. The following is a well-accepted definition of self-esteem.

By self-esteem, we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy. In short, self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitude that the individual holds towards himself. It is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior (Coopersmith, 1967, pp. 4-5).

People derive their sense of self-esteem from the accumulation of experiences with themselves and with others and from assessments of the external world around them. Global self-esteem is thought to be relatively stable in a mature adult, and is resistant to change except by active and extended therapy. But since no personality or

cognitive trait is predictably stable for all situations and at all times, self-esteem has been categorized into three levels, the first of which is global self-esteem. Specific self-esteem is a second level of self-esteem, referring to one's appraisals of oneself in certain life situations, such as social interaction, education and so on. The degree of specific self-esteem a person has may vary depending on the situation or the trait in question. The third level, task self-esteem, relates to particular tasks within specific situations. For example, within the educational domain task self-esteem may refer to particular subject-matter areas.

And self-esteem can also be divided into positive self-esteem and low self-esteem. "Self-esteem could best be described as a set of unconscious self-beliefs formed over a lifetime, reflecting our perceptions of our abilities, our lovability, and how we attribute causality for the events in our lives." (Shindler). Katz (1993) suggests that there is a clear difference between genuine self-esteem and narcissism. True self-esteem requires an accurate judgment of one's own abilities in comparison to those of others. It is not a phony Narcissism self-esteem but a conditional acceptance of the weakness without feeling like a complete loser. A realistic assessment of the student's self-esteem should remain in tune with the student's needs for nurturance and support as abilities change over time. According to Shindler there are three traits of self-esteem: first, one's locus of control; second, one's sense of belonging and acceptance; and third, one's sense of competence or self-efficacy.

An internal locus of control is the belief that one is the master and creator of one's own fate. An internal locus of control comes from having a causal understanding of behavior and effect. Both the success and failure are not the external factors that just happen to one. The fates are not predetermined. People are freely making choices and taking responsibility for the consequences of those choices. And they will feel a sense of power and responsibility and are able to learn from their life experience.

A sense of belonging and acceptance is essential to a person's mental health and ability to trust and take risks (Inderbitzen & Clark, 1986). Without the experience of acceptance and a feeling of belonging, people are unable to love and accept themselves. They will deny their value and identity as a social member and the denial may cause hatred of themselves or of the entire group.

A sense of self-efficacy could be defined as a belief in one's competence in a specific domain. When people feel competent they are self-confident and enthusiastic. They will try harder and more readily trust their behaviors with a wise and pertinent judgment about the situation in the process. They will not be frustrated by the difficulties. Self-efficacy does not come from complements or being spared failure but from evidence. Bandura (1977) speaks of self-efficacy as the degree of expectancy that one will successfully perform a desired task. When people obtain

sensory feedback about the success in a given task or have demonstrated a talent, they will develop a trust in themselves and be confident in applying that ability in the future. The braggart and the show-off display a lack of confidence and unconscious self-doubts but not the contrary.

The present study attempts to provide relevant evidence whether the positive global self-esteem can facilitate the second language acquisition.

2. SUBJECTS

The subjects of my study are two post-graduates. They are English-majors and both have passed the TEM 8 (Test for English Majors-Band 8) examination. They can freely use English both in everyday life and academic domain. I will regard them as successful English learners without hesitation. Why I choose them to be my subjects is due to two reasons. Firstly I know them very well; secondly they are ordinary students that can reflect the common situation to some extent.

I try to find evidence for my hypothesis through the study of these two subjects by interview and questionnaire. I interviewed each of them about their learning experience, learning strategies and other factors that will influence the second language learning. And I sent them a questionnaire respectively to judge whether they have positive global self-esteem or not. If they do both have the positive global self-esteem, and the other influential factors vary greatly, then I will form a hypothesis that the positive global self-esteem can facilitate the second language learning. If not so, the hypothesis this time will be the opposite.

Wang is a 24-year-old post graduate student in Liaoning Normal University, female. Her learning of English is all by formal instruction. Feng is a 22-year-old post-graduate female student in the same university. Her knowledge of English was accumulated through the years of school education.

3. DATA AND DATA ANALYSES

The data of this study came from two sources, questionnaires and interview notes. The questionnaire lists the characteristics of positive global self-esteem to judge whether they have them or not. In it there are 21 questions and three alternatives to choose from, Yes, More or Less, and No. This questionnaire is in English. Among the 21 questions, the first 15 are plus characteristics which should be owned by a person who is positive global self-esteem. The rest 6 are minus ones that demonstrate that a person is low self-esteem (See Appendix 1). "Yes" means this feature is absolutely eligible in a person; "No" means completely do not have this feature while "More or Less" is in terms of degree. In the first 15 questions, a "Yes" is 1 point, a "More or Less" is 0 and a "No" is -1 point; while the rest 6 questions, a "Yes" is -1 point, a

“More or Less” is 0 and a “No” is 1 point. A completely ideal positive global self-esteem person will mark 21 points while a completely low global self-esteem person will receive -21 points.

Wang received 8 points. She chose 6 “Yes”, 7 “More or Less” and 2 “No” in the first 15 questions; and no “Yes”, 2 “More or Less” and 4 “No” in the rest 6 (Table 1). Feng received -2 points. She chose 2 “Yes”, 11 “More or Less” and 2 “No” in the first 15; and 2 “Yes”, 4 “More or Less” and no “No” in the rest 6 (Table 2).

Table 1
Wang’s Reply of the Questionnaire

	Yes	More or Less	No	Points
1-15	6	7	2	4
16-21	0	2	4	4

Table 2
Feng’s Reply of the Questionnaire

	Yes	More or Less	No	Points
1-15	2	11	2	0
16-21	2	4	0	-2

It is very hard to assess their answers, for there are no satisfactory criteria to depend on. And as people are always changing and they may not know themselves very well, so their choices may not reflect their real features. Their marks may only show a tendency. Wang shows a tendency towards positive global self-esteem, but it is still not so persuasive as she received 8 points in all. Feng shows a tendency towards low self-esteem with a mark of -2 (Figure 1).

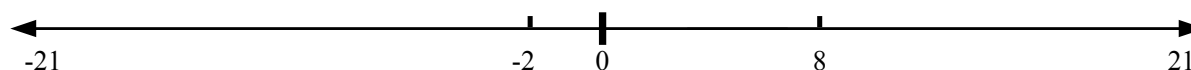


Figure 1
A Tendency of Assessment of the Questionnaire

Then I asked them 12 questions, open and semi-opened, regarding other influential factors in learning second language and these questions are in Chinese (See Appendix 2). After comparing and studying their answers, I could only find out one similarity that they have a clear confidence in their English ability. Wang said that as her English was good enough so she would not give English the longest time to study. She would pay much more attention to her weak points. Feng felt other subjects boring so she preferred to study English. But her study time is not long, for she only had one exercise book during the entire three years in the high school. They both believed that their English were good, though Wang’s teacher did not often praise her while Feng’s teacher evidently disliked her. Feng said that she seldom listened to the English lessons in middle school and high school, and she studied English mostly by herself. She considered her teacher as nothing helpful. Even she would believe in herself when there was disagreement between her and her teacher. When I asked them why chose to be English-majors, they both answered immediately that because their English were good. When I further asked them whether they had a strong confidence in their English ability, they both answered certainly yes. So I could judge from these statements that though they do not show a strong tendency towards positive global self-esteem, they do have a positive specific self-esteem.

CONCLUSION

My research focus is the effects of affective factors on SLA. I’m trying to comb through those typical affective

factors in order to find out how relevant they are to SLA respectively. I have explored motivation in another article centering on how to initiate and maintain motivation in SLA (LI, 2012). As for the present study, I choose the two subjects who share similar life experience, education background and academic performance in expect to control variables other than affective ones. As is shown by the case study and data analysis, I can safely come to the conclusion that from these two subjects, there is no relevant proof that the positive global self-esteem can facilitate the second language acquisition.

The study still has some limitations. The lack of clear definitions and methods and adequate amount of samples make the study of individual learner variables difficult. These learners’ characteristics are not independent of one another, and learner variables interact in complex ways. So far, researchers know very little about the nature of these complex interactions. Thus it remains difficult to make precise prediction about how a particular individual’s characteristics influence his or her success as a language learner. After we have better known the influence of the various factors and how they influenced our second language acquisition, we can greatly facilitate the second language learning and teaching. And that is what the study is for.

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APPENDIX 1

Questionnaire of the Characteristics of the Positive Global Self-esteem

	Yes	More or Less	No
1 Do you feel worthwhile and lovable?			
2 Do you have an ability to socialize, make friends easily?			
3 Do you have a positive influence on peers?			
4 Do you willing to and are able to cooperate in group-activities?			
5 Can you follow reasonable rules and suggestions?			
6 Are you courageous?			
7 Do you have the realistic fear of new situations?			
8 Do you have a wise judgment and confidence in the experiment with the new materials and social settings?			
9 Can you be frustrated and never recover from it?			
10 Do you have an ability to control your behavior mentally and physically?			
11 Are you independent and creative?			
12 Can you actively and freely share new ideas and creations with others?			
13 Do you have a wise judgment and understanding of yourself?			
14 Do you have a sense of personal pride in displaying your abilities?			
15 Do you have the awareness of your weak points?			
16 Are you afraid to talk to strangers and even to look at the straightly?			
17 Do you appear to be timid and fearful in almost all new undertakings?			
18 Do you mask your feelings of inferiority, weakness and insecurity by bullying and bragging or other means?			
19 Are you reluctant to express your opinion or share ideas with others for fear?			
20 Do you cannot free yourself from the history of failure and believe that you are incompetent and have no abilities without a pertinent analysis of the causes?			
21 Are you incapable of making decisions and think that "I can't do that" or "It's too hard"?			

APPENDIX 2

Questions About Other Influential Factors in Second Language Acquisition (in Chinese)

- 1 开始学习英语的时间和学习时长。
- 2 学习的方法。
- 3 学习的动机（指平常自主学习的动力，排除以应付考试为目的的学习）。
- 4 学习环境（学校的教学质量，家庭的环境影响）对英语学习有无影响？如有是什么影响？
- 5 课外自主学习的时间及内容。
- 6 课外时间自主运用英语的频率及态度。
- 7 有无与英语相关的爱好？如看英文电影，听英文歌曲等。
- 8 怎样评价自己的英语成绩？老师以及同学的评价？
- 9 是怎么样看待英语这门学科的？
- 10 为什么选择英语专业？
- 11 自己的性格与英语学习有无关系？如有，是怎样的关系？
- 12 以自己为例，学好英语应具备什么素质？