

The Role of Foreign Language Learners' Self- Esteem in Enhancing Their Oral Performance

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Abstract

Nowadays, the affective side of learners receives a noticeable attention in the learning process, mainly affective factors. The present study aims to explore the relationship between Algerian second year LMD students of English as a foreign language' self-esteem and their oral production at the University of Constantine 01, Algeria. The hypothesis is that the more Algerian second year students of English, at the University of Constantine 1, trust their abilities, and the more they believe in their capacities, the more they will be able to enhance their speaking performance in the foreign language. The research work is mainly concerned with finding whereby the feeling of "I am able to do it" has anything to do with learners' oral production. The research methodology adopted in this study is a descriptive one. It intends to describe two variables: self-esteem as the presumed independent variable and foreign language speaking as the presumed dependent variable, and to identify the relationship between them. Data were gathered through a series of questionnaires administered to a random sample of 30 Algerian second year LMD students, and delivered to 10 teachers of Oral Expression, both at the English Department, University of Constantine 1. The results obtained from the present research show that there is a positive relationship between students' self-esteem and their foreign language speaking performance, and that this relationship affects directly their level of academic achievement in general. Evidence that has been confirmed by the majority of teachers' answers to the questionnaire. Furthermore, at the light of this study, it is possible to put forward that a learner's real judge in learning a foreign spoken language is himself. Overall, the results obtained lead us to suggest that learners must pay more attention to their self-esteem for better oral performance.

Key Words: Affective factors, self-esteem, speaking skill.

1. Introduction

In a foreign language teaching class, today's professional interest is on the students' speaking skill development, because, in general, success is shown through the speaking ability, as mentioned by Nunan (1991: 39)

“To most people, mastering the art of speaking is the single most important factor of learning a second or foreign language and success is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the language”.

Thus, speaking is a crucial skill in learning a foreign language. It is very important to experience real communicative situations in which learners will learn how to express their own views and opinions, and to develop their oral fluency and accuracy which are very essential for the success of second language communication.

Speaking, in particular, is one of the four skills, (namely, listening, writing, and reading) which requires special abilities to be mastered, as it is an act of love between the teacher and the learner. For that reason, a greater opportunity of the psychological principles is being truly demanded in learning to speak. Human affective areas are essential for human language acquisition. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the general nature of human learning such as learning and training. The training of students requires a special deep psychological knowledge on the part of the teacher as well as on the part of the learner, too.

There can be no doubt today about the importance of affect for learning. As Rodríguez, Plax and Kearney (1996: 297) explained, “Affect is by definition, an intrinsic motivator. Positive affect sustains involvement and deepens interest in the subject matter”. It can lead to more effective learning and, in fact, may be essential for learning to occur.

If we were looking for a golden rule for language learning, one possible candidate would be Stevick's (1980: 4) statement about what success in this process relied on “less on materials, techniques and linguistic analysis and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom”. This often quoted phrase has been used to support the role of affect in language learning.

If we were within a learning situation to find out about the most powerful influential factors on learning, self-esteem would be the foremost needed for effective learning. It is common to think that if we trust our own capacities we will learn to speak easily. Noticeably, students who have a high level of self-esteem find it enjoyable to learn how to speak, whereas students with a low self-esteem are not motivated to speak, afraid and inhibited when they come to express themselves orally; as a result, they often lose marks concerning their academic level in speaking. Thus, teachers must constantly be searching for effective ways in order to foster learners' self-esteem for effective speaking, and most importantly, draw their students' attention to the relative significance of having faith in their beliefs about their capacities, in order to achieve better outcomes in speaking the foreign language, and teach them that self-esteem has the total power to direct their results in speaking positively.

1. Introducing the Key Terms of the Present Research

2.1. The Speaking Skill

According to Bygate (1987), the speaking skill demands special care like the other skills, for both the mother tongue and the foreign language, as it requires a firm trust on one's own abilities to reach his/her goals. It is the skill whereby others recognize us from what we say and how we think. As it is the skill, whereby people befriend or separate others. Since it is the means of expressing and moving the solidarity of societies, social positions, it is an excellent tool for allowing the learning of languages to take place. Clark and Clark (1977) have argued that speakers who speak in order to influence their listeners, through asking questions to get information; use speaking as a tool and, besides that they engage in many activities to reach their goals.

2.2. The Affective Domain

First, it is worth defining the affective domain as a general term that covers all the affective variables, It is important to mention that the affective side is not a widespread mentioned concept because it is concerned with emotions, feelings, and affection in general as stated by Bloom and his colleagues (Krathwohl, Masia, 1964). However, in recent years the importance of affective issues has become a matter of debate and extensive research among language teachers, linguists and researchers; and some variables were found as having a high impact on success in EFL/ESL learning. Defining the affective variables is elusive, thus an overview of the ones considered to be influenced by the

teacher's attitude will be briefly described below. About the definition of affect, (Brown, 2000, p. 143) has posited that: "the affective domain is the emotional side of human behaviors and it may be juxtaposed to cognitive side", likewise, Oxford (1990) stated affect as emotions, attitudes values, and motivation. Gardner and Mac (1992: 03) also have argued that affective variable, are those "emotionally relevant characteristics of the individual that influence how he/she will respond to any situation". Therefore, we deduce that the affective side of the learner contributes to at least as much and often more to language learning (Stern 1983).386).

2.3. Self –Esteem

Self-esteem is one of the affective factors that influence human's production among many others; Brown (2007: 154) posited that:

"Self-esteem is probably the most pervasive aspect of human behaviour. It could easily be claimed that no successful cognitive or affective activity can be carried out without some degree of self-esteem, self-confidence, knowledge of yourself and self-efficacy belief in your own capacities to successfully perform that activity".

2.3.1. Levels of Self- Esteem:

According to Brown (2007), three levels of self-esteem have been described in the literature to capture its multi dimensions, namely, global, situational and task self-esteem.

2.3.1. a. Global Self- Esteem:

It is a quite fixed and steady characteristic in grown up people, it does not change over time except through wide treatment. It is considered as the examiner of ones' own value across both time and discriminate situations.

2.3.1. b. Situational Self- Esteem:

It refers to one's judgment of the value in his life as social interaction, work, education, home, or any certain relatively discretely defined traits such as intelligence, communicative ability, athletic ability, or personality traits like gregariousness, empathy, and flexibility to the circumstances and the particular qualities of personalities.

2.3.1. c. Task Self- Esteem:

Task self-esteem is named after this name because it is connected to specific or particular tasks in particular circumstances. Such as, in scholar education, task self-esteem is related to one side of subject-matter, or in athletic situations, a certain skill of sport is assessed in relation to task self-esteem.

All in all, self-esteem is proved through its levels and definitions to have the most powerful impact on learners' results and it is in the learners' hands to be excellent or the reverse due to their feeling.

2.3.2. Self- Esteem and Self-Efficacy

One of the primary affective elements is self-efficacy, it is important here to understand the distinction between self-efficacy and self-esteem. Self-esteem is the person's feeling of his/her self-worth, whereas self-efficacy refers to the person's belief of his or her ability to reach a goal.

4. Research Question:

At Constantine 01 University in Algeria, second year learners of English are struggling to improve and develop their English communicative skills, in particular the speaking skill. Although they have learned English for many years, the majority of them are still incapable to use English orally "they sometimes hesitate, repeat themselves, stutter or make slips of the tongue" Clark and Clark (1977, 6). Their poor achievement in oral productions is not always the consequence of any of the linguistic factors since many learners own the language competence and are being taught throughout effective processes' approaches, but which refers to psychological factors which are more concerned with the fear of making mistakes.

This feeling comes from the low self-esteem they have. Someone with a low self-esteem is believed to be unconfident, while confidence is strongly needed by learners to present their English orally. For Amato (2003), self-esteem is a very important factor in providing learners with the power to be motivated towards their own abilities to enjoy the learning process and experience real communication.

Cardner (1994) argued that students cannot defeat the fear that faces them in speaking the foreign language in the classroom. The problem we are confronted with in this research is the kind of relationship between learners' self-esteem and their speaking skills.

The precise questions we would ask are:

1-What is the relationship between self-esteem and oral productions for 2nd year LMD learners of English?

2-Do successful learners show higher self-esteem in oral tasks than do less successful learners?

3. The Hypothesis:

This study will examine if self-esteem is helpful in oral production. If self-esteem can be proved to enhance learning, then one should pay due attention to self-esteem in educational community to heighten achievement in all subjects. Generally, foreign language students' failure to speak English in the classroom may emerge from at least two factors:

One is that learners are really weak and they consider speaking in English a very difficult task; and the second one is that in spite of the students' knowledge, there are some personality factors like self-esteem which prevent them from doing so.

In other words, the general hypothesis can be stated as follows: if Algerian second year learners of English at the University of Constantine 01 trusted their own abilities, they would be more motivated and energetic to become positive about their own oral skill production.

5. Method:

5.1. Subjects

The actual problem was observed among all levels of the students in English LMD classes at Constantine 1 University in Algeria, however, because of the huge number of learners, we decided to work just with 2nd year level because throughout the first year, students were trained using all the teaching processes' approaches, and they were learning the new language competence; thus, in their second year, students are supposed to be able to take risks in speaking since they have started to develop their self-esteem from their first year. Out of 20 groups, with a population of one thousand and a hundred and sixty seven (1165), we have selected randomly one group with 30 students; the students in this class will be all of mixed ages and sexes (males and females), males about 20% and females about 80% - the variable sex is not considered in my research – The tools of the research. We assume that our sample of students would be homogeneous in terms of instructions input and cultural environment. But for teachers, we will limit our sample to 12 teachers of oral expression module among 30 teachers; both samples were selected on Mai 2010.

5.2. The Tools of the Procedure

In order to test our hypothesis, to obtain the information required from our subjects, and to fit the objectives of our present research we will be using one main tool which is a questionnaire.

First, a formal questionnaire will be given to teachers to ensure that their responses and recommendations are the result of their long interaction with English language learners during many years of observation of learners' performance, particularly teachers of oral expression module; it is also about their opinions towards self-esteem as a significant criterion for effective language learners speaking production, plus trying to probe their opinions about their focal point in teaching oral expression module in addition to a small comparison of the presence of shyness in the other language skills and its relation to oral expression module, their opinions about the reasons to students' failure in speaking.

The second questionnaire will be directed to 2nd year English students at the University of Constantine 1, to know their points of view about self-esteem and oral performance in general. It was mainly about their own information about their level to know about their self-esteem, then about their perception of the easiness or difficulty of the speaking skill, we asked them also about their views about the reasons which either motivate or cause failure to talk in the classroom, the effects of shyness on their self-esteem to speak and the effects of their positive thinking on their level of interaction in the classroom.

If the information obtained through the use of a questionnaire is of value, it is nevertheless not enough. For more objectivity, we do believe that the inclusion of another data gathering tool would be indispensable. The administration of a test would be of great importance for our investigation by testing the attitudes and the reactions of our sample of students towards the role of self-esteem in enhancing their oral performance, and this would be in the direction or against the direction of our hypothesis and reinforces our investigations. However; because of the constraints of time, the test was prepared, but we could not find the time to do it. Hence, we believed that questionnaires' results would be of great importance for our research by analyzing them quantitatively and qualitatively to see if the results obtained are in the direction of our hypothesis to cast some light on the importance of self-esteem for better EFL language speaking in the language classroom.

6. Results and Discussion

The results of the teachers/students' questionnaire are presented in this section. Some of the responses are significant in terms of the positive attitudes they displayed towards effective speaking through self-confidence, while some others are not.

As a result, we can say that not surprisingly, our research findings (the analysis of the questionnaires) display considerable agreements with what we have set before as assumptions and suppositions, that indeed the feeling of self-esteem boosts learners' oral performance.

Basically of (120) questions that we have analyzed in the questionnaire, out of (120) questions, (110) answers indicate interestingly that teachers are supporting greatly our assumptions with regard to the teaching and learning situation:

1) Teachers' Questionnaire:

- 100% of the total respondents (N=10) said that they consider self-esteem as an important aspect of successful speaking, this is very straight to the direction to our hypothesis, this shows that all the teachers are aware and conscious of the role of self-confidence to learners' spoken language.

- 30% of the total respondents said that they always try to show, to their learners, the importance of believing in their abilities in order to speak successfully, while 40% said they often do that, and 20% said sometimes, against the rest 10% who said they rarely do. This is not really a pure agreement about the teachers' views on trying to always show learners the significance of self -esteem for better speaking, but it is too that they often show them that self-esteem is very helpful for learners, and this indicates the importance teachers give to this affective factor which is again in accordance with our hypothesis.

- 70% of teachers said that they teach learners that they are as they mirror themselves, and 30% said that they do not teach their students so. That shows that teachers think that if students believe they are good speakers and they can have a good accent, they will be good speakers in reality, if not; this image will be reflected negatively in their real academic life. This is another support for our investigation.

- 20% said that they focus on the effective attitudinal factors, 20% said that they focus on learners' affective and attitudinal factors, 20% said they focus on the appropriate and effective teaching methodology, the smallest percentage was a 10% who said they focus on the necessary teaching environment. Against 50% who said they focus on all of them. In this question, teachers' answers were not really in the direction of our hypothesis

because their answers were concentrating on all the above suggestions not just affective factors.

- 100% agree that there are students who, really, get good marks in grammar and phonetics but do not do in oral expression. This question was to show that rather than linguistic and teaching methodology, there exist other reasons that influence the learners' acquisition of L2, which is in our case self-esteem.

- A frank question was directly asked to teachers about the reason behind students' failure in the speaking production, with another choice. The answer was clear cut that self-esteem has the most powerful influences on students' level in speaking English. The answers were that 20% said that students' failure is due to the fact that speaking is a difficult task for them; against 80% who stated that their failure refers to the low self-esteem they feel.

Again about learners' questionnaire, and as global analysis of students' questionnaire, we can understand, with some relief that approximately out of (363) questions, (350) answers show that they are more or less confident in their abilities to learn English i.e. having a high level of self-esteem. They are also supporting our presupposition and our points of view concerning the significance of the feeling of self-esteem to enhance their oral performance,

- 66.66% of students said that they try speaking in the classroom because they feel they can speak English, and 26.67% admitted that they participate orally just because they are afraid about the mark. Here, this question is very important because it made us understand the power of self-esteem in pushing learners to talk in comparison to another weak factor which is the fear about the mark although the mark is the way to succeed and the aim of learners. Thus, self-esteem is really a crucial element for communications and thus for marks.

- Always and to confirm our hypothesis, the following question was about shyness which results from low self-esteem. 46.66% said that they do not keep silent when they feel they need to speak with their friends, 53.33% agree that they really keep silent with their friends. So, the answers showed that shyness is a barrier to talk with friends.

- Again and to prove our assumption about shyness as an obstacle to speaking for students, this question was directed to have answers which are although not with a significant difference but still with a clear proportion of difference that learners' shyness is a real

barrier for the spoken language to take place because the results were that 46.66% of learners said they keep silent for the reason of being shy to speak with native speakers, while 43.33% of them do not keep silent when they feel shy speaking to native speakers.

- 40% said that the reason behind their silence was difficulties in speaking English, whereas; 60% of them answered that they feel shy to speak to their teachers which does not allow them to practice their oral English. This question is just like the all above questions which are to prove that self-esteem is the powerful factor among many other factors to influence speaking. And in fact, the answers to this question proved this hypothesis.

7. Conclusion:

The present study has covered the problem of how self-esteem affects learners' level of oral expression achievement. It was mainly interested in testing the fact that learners of English, who trusted their own abilities, would be more energetic and motivated to become positive about their own oral skill productions. Through analyzing the impact of high self-esteem on learners' oral achievements and therefore on their success in general, our research finding sheds some light on its significance to markedly account for spoken language learners' academic achievements. Moreover, the results that we have obtained are in accordance with our review of literature and in the direction of our research hypothesis, that students of lower self-esteem have a low level of spoken language achievement, despite the fact that they have real linguistic abilities, while students of higher self-esteem attain a good level of spoken language production. We, also, ensure the idea that foreign language learners' beliefs affect their self-decision on their spoken language performance. Through this estimation of the data obtained, we end up by the following results: The image of foreign language learners about themselves and their capacities in speaking English reflects the varied results in their academic oral achievement successfully. Moreover, self-esteem is one of the factors that cannot be neglected for its considerable help, as agreed by Brodkey and Shore (1976) that Self-esteem is an effective factor in learning the oral skill of a foreign language. For that reason, we must notice that besides teaching the linguistic competence to learners, they must pay due attention to learners' affective domains in particular their self-esteem to increase their academic level in oral performance positively. Therefore, we end this article by some very general suggestions, that, we hope, will help learners as well as teachers in the foreign oral language classroom, namely, for learners, to trust their abilities and give importance to themselves in speaking

the foreign language far from fear and shyness, and for teachers to pay significant attention to the affective domains.

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