



Self-concept: What is it, and why is it important?

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Self-concept and self-related concepts abound in the literature related to education and psychology. A positive sense of self or self-concept is widely considered to be important. But what is self-concept? Should we be trying to enhance it? How does it relate to foreign language learning? This presentation focuses on these and other questions related to self-concept. An overview of the literature on self-concept shows support for the importance of enhancing self-concept. Self-concept is clarified and differentiated from self-esteem, self-efficacy, and identity. Suggestions for classroom application, based on an understanding of self-concept and its importance, are given.

自己概念及び自己に関連した概念は教育学や心理学に関する論文に多くみられる。一般的に自己や自己概念を肯定的に捉えることは重要であると考えられている。しかし、自己概念とは何であろうか。また、自己概念をさらに高めるべきであろうか。外国語学習とどのように関係しているのだろうか。本発表は以下の三点を中心に、自己概念に関連した疑問について述べている。まず、自己概念についての論文を概観すると、自己概念を高めることの重要性を論じていることが多いという点である。次に、自己概念は自尊心やセルフ・エフィカシーやアイデンティティと明確に区別されているという点である。最後に、自己概念の理解とその重要性に基づいた教室活動への応用の提案である。

Why is self-concept important?

Self-concept has been shown to be able to predict achievement in many areas, including sports, work, and academic situations. *Predict* does not necessarily mean *cause*. It simply means high correlation. Over the past few years there has been a *chicken and egg* debate over whether self-concept has a causal effect on academic achievement (the self-concept enhancement model) or whether academic achievement causes self-concept (the skill development model). The *self-concept* group argues that self-concept is the cause of achievement and argues for interventions that enhance self-concept, while the *skill development* group argues that previous achievement is the cause of high or low self-concept, and that

the focus should be on building skills, which will naturally cause an improvement in self-concept.

As usual, there is a middle ground to this chicken and egg question – the reciprocal effects model – which considers both self-concept and achievement to have causal effects on each other. This is the generally accepted position at present, which is supported by a great body of recent research (e.g. Marsh, Craven, & McInerney, 2003; 2005).

Given this, the pedagogical implications are clear: in addition to developing students' skills, which is usually the focus of teacher education programs, teachers need to work on self-concept enhancement, a task which many teachers are often not trained to do. Self-concept adherents would argue that they need to do this for at least two reasons:

1. for its own sake, that is for the overall health and happiness of the individual,
2. and for the benefits to achievement, through mediating factors such as motivation and attention.

Some researchers (e.g. Craven, Marsh, & Burnett, 2003) also add a third reason: for alleviating societal problems and social inequalities.

Though not all research supports these claims, self-concept researchers (Marsh, Craven, & McInerney, 2005) argue that the problem with inconclusive research results derive from a focus on general self-esteem rather than a domain-specific self-concept. In the former case the results tend to be ambiguous or contradictory, whereas in the latter case reciprocal effects are usually found.

The following quote, and other similar ones, is often used by self-concept proponents to support the importance of self-concept:

Of all the judgments we pass in life, none is as important as the one we pass on ourselves. Nearly every psychological problem — from anxiety and depression to self-sabotage at work or at school, from fear of intimacy to chronic hostility — is traceable to low self-esteem. (Brandon, 2006)

Relating this idea to EFL in Japan, I immediately think of the common experience of approaching a Japanese person and asking them a simple question in Japanese but not being understood, not because your Japanese is incomprehensible, but because they're expecting you to speak English. A self-concept interpretation of this occurrence is that the addressee's low self-concept in English causes them not to listen or pay attention.

Notice I referred to self-concept in English, while the Brandon quote refers to self-esteem. Though self-esteem and self-concept are used by many to mean the same thing, I'd like to differentiate them, and to clarify what self-concept is and what it isn't.

What is self-concept?

William James was the first psychologist to study the Self. In his classic "The Principles of Psychology" (1890) he refers to the self as "*In its widest possible sense, however, a man's Self is the sum total of all that he CAN call his*" (James, 1890, Chapter 10). He also refers to three aspects of the self:

1. The material self – one's body, clothes, and immediate family.
2. The social self – the recognition one gets from one's friends. According to James, "Properly speaking, a

man has as many social selves as there are individuals who recognize him" (1890, Chapter 10).

3. The spiritual self – one's different states of consciousness, psychological faculties, and dispositions.

These three are aspects of the *Me* self, to which he also adds the *I* self, pure ego.

Though we have come a long way since then, James was way ahead of his time in this claim of the multidimensionality of self. It took some time, but this is one of the areas in which his ideas have been extensively built on. It is also the aspect that seems to be the key to the debate between the self-concept enhancement group and the skills development group. Using advanced statistical analyses (Structural Equation Modeling), which do show causality, as opposed to mere correlation, self-concept is shown to be an important cause of academic achievement, when a measure of academic self-concept is used, but not with measures of general self-esteem (Marsh, Craven, & McInerney, 2005).

Self-concept, self-esteem and self-efficacy

Self-concept, self-esteem, and self-efficacy are often used interchangeably. Given the above difference in research results with slightly different emphases, it will be useful to differentiate between these three concepts. Some recent definitions of them are given below:

- Self-concept: "a person's self-perceptions formed through experience with and interpretations of his or her environment" (Marsh & Hattie, 1996, p. 58).

- "a self-descriptive judgment that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth" (Pajares & Schunk, 2005, p. 104).
- Self-esteem: "the global component of self-concept" (Marsh & Craven, 2005, p. 32).
- Self-efficacy: "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations" (Bandura, 1997, p. 2).
- "a judgment of capability to perform a task or engage in an activity" (Pajares & Schunk, 2005, p. 103-104).

From these definitions, self-esteem and self-concept seem to be very similar, if not exactly the same, concepts when global self-concept is considered. As most of the research on specific aspects of self-concept uses this term, and the research results are clearer when this is used, self-concept seems to reflect the multidimensional aspects of self better than self-esteem, and thus more appropriate for EFL teachers and researchers, who would be more interested in an English-specific self-concept.

Pajares and Schunk's two definitions clearly show how self-concept differs from self-efficacy: self-concept includes self-efficacy, along with an evaluation of self-worth based on the task or action. Though Marsh and Hattie above do not include feelings of self-worth, Marsh and Craven (2005) state that self-concept may include these feelings.

Self-concept as multidimensional and hierarchical

The modern account of the multidimensionality of self-concept (as compared to James') is that global self-concept can be divided into:

- Academic self-concept
- Social self-concept
- Emotional self-concept
- Physical self-concept

(Marsh & Shavelson, 1985; Marsh, 1993)

It is also hierarchical, in that these can also be sub-divided. Academic self-concept can be subject-specific, e.g. Language Arts (or *Kokugo* in Japan), Maths, Science, Art, Music, and of course EFL in Japan. I would suggest that because of the importance of English on university entrance exams and after graduation for employment and promotion, and the general positive attitudes towards English and English-speakers in Japan, that EFL plays an important part of general academic self-concept for many of our students. This academic self-concept is the aspect of self-concept that has been most successful at showing causality with achievement (Marsh, Craven, & McInerney, 2005).

Self and Identity

Self vs. Identity – It is also important, especially considering the theme of this conference, to differentiate, and clarify the relationship, between Self and Identity. Identity theorists differ in their views of this relationship. Some (e.g. Hunt, 2003) see the self as including our multiple identities,

while some (e.g. Weinreich, 2003) see our identity as including our multiple selves. From a psychological (self) as opposed to sociological (identity) perspective though, I find Weinreich's delineation the most useful: "Personhood being the unique person that comprises self in three aspects – the singular agentic, the reflective, and the publicly expressive" (Weinreich, 2003, p. 34). He also adds: "Identity is more than the self is. The agentic self formulates the sense of identity over biographical time, which includes representations of other agents and agencies beyond that of the self" (Weinreich, 2003, p. 42).

The three aspects of self he refers to are:

1. Self 1: Singular, agent, actor, and knower.
2. Self 2: Reflexive, includes self-concept.
3. Self 3: Public self – the presentation of self in everyday life.

The public self is considered to be important in cultures like Japan, which are seen as being collectivist and "tight". According to Triandis (1995), tight cultures are "rigid in requiring that ingroup members behave according to the ingroup norms" (p. 339). Cultures that are both collectivist and tight tend to produce behaviour based on the "public" self, as opposed to the "private" and "collective" selves. The public self is "an assessment of the self by the generalized other" (p. 329). This should lead to behaviour that is "proper" and defined by society. Kuwayama (1992) refers to this as "generalized reference others" (p. 143). Greer, referring specifically to student behaviour in the EFL classroom in Japan, calls this "the eyes of hito" (Greer, 2000, p. 183).

As teachers, being aware of these three aspects of self, could help us to be more effective, and more sensitive to our students' cognitive, social, and emotional needs. I also believe that one of the most effective things we can do is to focus on our students' subject-specific self-concepts (self 2).

How can we relate self-concept to our teaching?

The first thing we can do is to believe in our students, to have a positive self-concept of our students. This is the power of teacher expectations – the Pygmalion Effect. This is not magical, but our beliefs convey themselves to our students in terms of the:

- Class atmosphere
- The feedback we give to students
- The appropriate amount and type of input
- The chances for questions

We should also recognise the *reciprocal effects* research results and therefore use strategies that increase achievement while also enhancing self-concept. Conversely we should avoid strategies that may damage either achievement or self-concept. For example, competition between students may eventually negatively affect the self-concept of many students, especially those students who never do well competing against other students, and so ultimately negatively affect achievement. In addition, inappropriate positive feedback for marginal work may undermine achievement and long-term self-concept though it may give immediate positive feelings to the student.

Finally, we need to give appropriate feedback. Feedback is one of the most important ways in which teachers can help students on an individual level. Hattie (2002) suggests three questions which are the core of important feedback:

1. Where are we going? (What are the goals or aims?)
2. How are we going? (in relation to some standard or task.) and
3. Where to next? (in terms of *progress*, not merely *more of the same*.)

He also gives four levels on which feedback can be given:

1. Feedback about the self,
2. Feedback about the task,
3. Feedback about task-processing, and
4. Feedback about self-regulation.

Feedback about the self includes criticism and praise, such as “You are a great student.” Hattie argues that it is the least effective in terms of achievement, as it is too diluted and uninformative. This may seem obvious, but it is important to recognize that it is not only *what* teachers say, but how it is perceived by the students, which may be affected by such factors as when, how, and how often the feedback is given.

Feedback about the task, such as whether their answers on a question is correct or wrong, or their overall score on a test, is only powerful when it is useful for enhancing self-regulated learning, usually when it is accompanied by feedback on the final two levels.

The final two levels of feedback – about task-processing and self-regulation – are the most powerful, as they involve deep processing of the information and a focus on mastery motivation. An example of feedback on task processing may be working with a student after a vocabulary quiz and discussing how she prepared for the test. This would involve addressing questions like: “How did she use her notebook or notecards?”; “How did she memorize the words? By rote memorization? Visualization?”; “Did she quiz herself alone or with a partner?” “How often and when?” Then discussing the perceived success or failure of these strategies and practices in relation to the result on the quiz.

Feedback about self-regulation is arguably the most important, and the least given, form of feedback. It involves addressing the issues of autonomy or control, commitment (especially if there is not much choice in the task), and competence or confidence.

The feedback we give, or do not give, our students, whether it is our intention or not, affects students’ academic self-concept. The most empowering forms of feedback are the final two forms, which attempt to give students the skills to take control of their learning, while implicitly sending them the message that we believe they can do it.

Conclusion

In conclusion, recent research on self-concept that recognizes and focuses on its multidimensional nature supports the argument for enhancing students’ self-concept. The confusion amongst self-related concepts mirrors the confused ways in which teachers can and do

attempt to enhance self-concept. Some of these attempts are, unfortunately, ineffective, such as feedback about the self (Hattie, 2002). Some researchers (e.g. Dweck, 1999) argue that this kind of feedback about the self, even positive feedback such as praise, is not only ineffective but can even be detrimental. It is therefore crucial that teachers appreciate the reciprocal nature of the causal relationship between self-concept and achievement, and develop effective practices that focus on enhancing students’ general academic or English-specific self-concept.

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