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## Personality Variable of Self-Esteem and EFL Reading Comprehension

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### Abstract

*The contribution of psychology to the process of learning, in general, and language learning, in particular, is so pervasive that there is hardly an aspect of language learning/teaching which could not be related to psychology. Among the psychological variables involved in language pedagogy, personality factors can have great significance. The aim of the present study is to determine if there is any association between the crucial personality factor of self-esteem (self-concept) (along with the sex variable) and the reading comprehension achievement of English major university students. The instruments used were Beck Self-Concept Scale (1967), the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language, 1992), and the Nelson Standard Reading Test (1977). The findings of the analysis of two-way ANOVA revealed that the independent variables of self-esteem and sex have a significant effect on students' performance in EFL reading comprehension although their interaction (self-esteem/sex) was not significant.*

### Psychology and Language Learning

The need for more systematic psychology research on language learning was fully recognized and clearly expressed by Carroll in the fifties. Carroll (1953) remarks, "we are fundamentally ignorant of the psychology of language learning." He believes that educational psychology might provide helpful answers to pedagogy by carrying out research on specific questions of language learning.

Among the psychological factors affecting the language learning process, the role of the 'affective' (Brown 1973; Scovel 1978; Brown 1987; Brown 1994), or 'learner' (Swain 1977) variables can never be neglected. Chastain (1976) suggested that there appear to be different types of factors which influence the learner: in other words, "learner variables can be divided into two subcategories: intrinsic learner variables and extrinsic ones. Schwartz (1972) lists the intrinsic motivators as anxiety, need to achieve, self concept (self-esteem), and aspiration; and the extrinsic motivators as socio-cultural influences and social reinforcers. Personality characteristics (e.g., self-esteem), then, are a subdivision of the intrinsic affective or learner variables. According to Chastain (1988), the affective domain plays a large role in developing second language skills than does the cognitive because the emotions control the will to activate or to shut down the cognitive functions. Chastain (1988) believes that of all the learner variables, the most influential are those related to the learners' emotions, attitudes, and personalities. As Rivers (1981) points out, once language learning becomes more than the study of rules and paradigms, and moves toward real communication of ideas, emotions, and aspiration, dynamic and personality psychology have a contribution to make.

Although the personality factor is one of the most important attributes of a human being, its study was until recently ignored by most psychologists. Some Scholars believe that personality is what we refer to as the 'self'. Lindgren (1953), for instance, maintains that the 'self' which is the result, in part, of biological and social inheritance, and which is shaped by situations in which it finds itself, is what psychologists call the 'personality'. A distinction has been made between personality traits and personality states. Nearly all of the adjectives that can be used to summarize people's behaviour can refer either to characteristic differences

between people (traits) or to temporary fluctuations or moods within the same individual i.e. by personality we refer to traits rather than states.

Although it is interesting simply to describe and to assess personality, it is also important to determine its origins and the causes of permanence and change. It is generally believed that a great deal more of normal personality functioning is due to genetic influences (e.g., Goldsmith 1983, Roediger et al. 1987). Bouchard et al. (1990) in a study of adult identical twins who were separated at birth and raised apart concluded that although the emotional environments in which these identical twins were brought up differed notably, their profiles on objective personality questionnaires are very similar and they are more similar than genetically unrelated individuals who are reared in the same home. In another interesting study by Gupta (1990) it was shown that the individual's blood group, as a genetically-based characteristic, is closely related to the personality variables and can be a determining factor in predicting one's behaviour.

Some psychologists (e.g., Cook 1984) believe that personality is what we call as self-esteem or self-concept. In fact, humans have two gifts animals lack: one is language, the other is self-awareness. Humans after the age of two or so, start to have some ideas of who they are and how they want others to see them i.e. they develop a concept of 'self'. Cook (1984) asserts that personality is not an elusive set of traits or factors, nor a vast bundle of habits, nor the ever-shifting phenomenal field; it is how the person sees himself or herself i.e. his or her self-concept. According to Brown (1987), people derive their sense of self-esteem from the accumulation of experiences with themselves and others from the assessments of the external world around them.

The concept of self-esteem can be very much related to the learning process, in general, and language learning, in particular (Krashen 1988, Heyde 1987, Lu 1983, Oller et al. 1977, Brodkey & Shore 1976, Gardner & Lambert 1972). Second or foreign language learning situations are not an exception i.e. the association between self-concept and second language learning is so pervasive that the learner starts to develop a new 'language self or ego' while learning a new language and its four skills. The relationship between self-concept and reading as an important language skill has been investigated by a few researchers (e.g., Wattenberg & Clifford 1964, Lamy 1965, Strang et al. 1961, Weingarten 1958) who are mostly concerned with children learning to read their native language rather than with learners involved in learning to read in a second or foreign language. In the present research study an attempt is made to investigate if there is an association between the EFL students' reading comprehension achievements and the concept they have developed of their own selves and their sex variable.

## **Method**

**Subjects:** The participants under study were 180 university students (90 male & 90 female, each with 45 low self concept & 45 high self concept subjects) from different English language departments in Tehran. The subjects were randomly selected from a large group of 578 undergraduate students majoring in English as a foreign language and were matched on intermediate level of language proficiency based on the scores they obtained on the 1992 version of TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language). The students served as the subjects of the present investigation were categorized into four male and female high/low self-concept groups on the basis of their scores on Beck Self-Concept Scale (1967).

**Instrumentation:** To fulfill the objective of this study i.e. to determine if there is any correlation between the EFL students' level of reading comprehension ability and their self-concept (self-esteem) along with the sex variable, the following instrumentations were utilized:

1. The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) (1992) was employed to match the students on intermediate level of language proficiency. The test was in multiple-choice form with 150 items consisting of listening comprehension (50 items), structure and written expression (40 items), and vocabulary and reading comprehension (60 items) sections.
2. To determine the students' level of self-concept as a personality variable, Beck Self-Concept Scale (1967) was used. This psychological test of self-concept had 25 items each with five choices. There was no right or wrong answer and the choices acted as independent items i.e. the test actually had 125 items. All the choices were in the form of sentences and were given weights ranging from 1-5. The lowest score of the test was 25 meaning that the student with this score selected all the choices with he weight of 1 and, therefore; had the lowest level of self-concept, and the highest score was 125 i.e. the student who obtained this score selected all the choices with the weight of 5 and had the highest level of self-concept among the subjects. The self-concept test validity and reliability established by psychologists are given in the following Table (Table 1). The self-concept test was validated with Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (1979).

Reliability	Internal Consistency	0.80
	Test-Retest	0.80
Validity	Concurrent	0.55

**Table (1):** Beck Self-Concept Scale Reliability & Validity

3. To investigate the students' reading comprehension ability, the level C version of the Nelson Standard Reading Test (1977) was utilized. The test was in multiple-choice form and consisted of 70 items (29 vocabulary & 41 reading comprehension items).

**Design**

As the study consisted of two main independent variables (self-concept & sex) each with two levels and one dependent variable (reading comprehension), a two by two factorial design was worked out to determine the effect of not only each individual variable but also the two variables interaction on EFL students' reading comprehension. The design can be schematically represented as follows:

Sex	Male	Female
Self-Concept		
High	G1	G2
Low	G3	G4

- G1 = Group 1 = High Self-Concept Male Students
- G2 = Group 2 = High Self-Concept Female Students
- G3 = Group 3 = Low Self-Concept Male Students
- G4 = Group 4 = Low Self-Concept Female Students

## Procedures

To be on the safe side three null hypotheses were formulated. The null hypotheses indicate that there is no correlation between the two independent variables (self-esteem & sex) or even the interaction of these two variables and the dependent factor of reading comprehension achievement. To collect the data required for rejecting or supporting the null hypotheses stated in the study, the three tests (the Beck Self-concept Scale, TOEFL, & Nelson Reading test) were administered among the EFL students. One week before test administration, the students' instructors were consulted and arrangements were made. In addition, the research project and the procedure for administering the tests were explained in detail for them. The subjects were already informed that they would be given some tests and to make sure that they answer the TOEFL and reading comprehension test carefully, they were also informed that the tests would affect their class grades. The administration of the tests took place in two sessions with one week interval. In administering the tests, the extraneous factors such as time and classroom were controlled and the necessary directions and instructions for completing each test were explained for the participants and they were asked to indicate their sex and age on their answer sheets. To assure the students of the anonymity of their responses on the psychological test of self-concept which consisted of private questions regarding their personality characteristics, the subjects being assigned identification (code) numbers were required to write their names just on TOEFL and reading test and not on the self-concept scale. In this way students could answer the psychological test questions more honestly. The researcher, too, could match the three tests through the identification numbers on them.

## Results & Discussion

After providing separate tables of frequency for the four groups, the mean and standard deviation of each group self-concept and reading scores were computed (Table 2). The maximum and minimum scores of the students on Beck self-concept scale and reading test are presented in Table (3). Table (4) demonstrates the statistical analysis of two-way ANOVA for the students' scores in reading comprehension ability in the four groups related to self-concept and sex.

Group	Self-Concept (Self-Esteem)		Reading	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
G1	89.84	7.55	40	13.92
G2	83.80	6.98	34.53	14.86
G3	70.20	7.33	29.40	11.89
G4	65	10.26	23.80	10.40

**Table (2):** Mean & Standard Deviation of the Four Groups' Self-Concept & Reading Scores

Group	Self-Concept (Self-Esteem)		Reading	
	Max. Score	Min. Score	Max. Score	Min. Score
G1	103	76	61	8
G2	116	76	63	11
G3	75	43	58	7
G4	75	37	55	5

**Table (3):** Maximum & Minimum Self-Concept & Reading scores of the Four Groups'



Group	Mean	SD	t-observed	2-tail Probability Value
G1	40	13.92	1.80	.075
G2	34.53	14.86		
P < .05		n = 90	d. f. = 88	t-critical = 1.98

**Table (5):** T-test for Comparing Reading Comprehension Gain Scores of Male and Female High Self –Concept Groups

As the findings of Table (5) indicate, the t-observed value of 1.80 is not greater than the t-critical value (1.98) with 88 degrees of freedom and the 2-tail probability value is .075 which exceeds the probability level of .05. These results reveal that high self-concept male students did not perform significantly different from the students in high self-concept female group. To compare the performance of low self-concept male students (Group 3) and low self-concept female students (Group 4) in EFL reading comprehension, the second t-test analysis was carried out. The findings are presented in the following Table (6).

Group	Mean	SD	t-observed	2-tail Probability Value
G3	29.40	11.89	2.38	.020
G4	23.80	10.40		
P < .05		n = 90	d. f. = 88	t-critical = 1.98

**Table (6):** T-test for Comparing Reading Comprehension Gain Scores of Male and Female Low Self –Concept Groups

As clear from Table (6), the t-observed value of 2.38 exceeds the critical value and the 2-tail probability value of .020 is much less than .05 probability level. This indicates that low self-concept male students' performance in reading comprehension was significantly different from that of low self-concept female students.

As the findings of the analysis of two-way ANOVA in the present study demonstrate, the first two null hypotheses were rejected i.e. the personality variable of self-esteem and sex have significant correlation with the EFL students' reading comprehension performance. However, the third hypothesis regarding the interaction effect of the two independent variables (self-esteem & sex) on reading achievements, was not rejected, which, provides a stronger support for the significance of each independent variable effect. The results of the two t-test analyses reveal that male students benefiting from having a higher level of self-esteem obtained higher mean scores in the reading test than the female students, although the highest self-concept and reading scores among the subjects in the study were obtained by female students. The significant difference took place in the low self-esteem groups (G3 & G4) where low self-concept male students' performance in reading comprehension was significantly better than low self-concept female students.

### Implications

The first implication of the present study is for curriculum and syllabus design. As Mouly (1976) maintains, there is a need to set the curriculum more in line with self-concept of students. According to him, education which limits itself to the manipulation of the external

environment and does not take the psychological and personality characteristics of the students particularly their phenomenal self-esteem into consideration, is doomed to failure. Much of the trouble in schools curriculum stems from attempts to work at activities which do not provide enhancement of the personal 'self' or which provide enhancement through such indirect means as grades and external rewards to the point that the learner is ego-involved in the rewards but not in the learning. If curriculum development is directed toward enhancing the students' self-esteem, even if there are some problems concerning the educational materials, facilities, etc., students will be successful in learning a foreign language and its reading comprehension skill which is sometimes considered as the most important language skill in foreign language learning situations. Along the same lines, designing a syllabus i.e. the specification of the content of a course of instruction and the order of presenting the content should provide the students with different ways of psychological and personality development and forming an appropriate language ego.

The results of the present study also carry some important implications for materials development especially in the area of reading comprehension which is the main concern of the study. Providing the students with materials geared to their independent and instructional levels and directing them toward obtainable goals will give them opportunities to achieve success, to enhance their level of self-concept, and as a result improve in reading comprehension.

The present study can have practical implications for teachers and language teaching methodology development. In educational environments, the learner is the center of all learning activities and any teaching method which does not take the learner and his individual characteristics into consideration will turn out to be a failure. Unfortunately, so far self-esteem significance has not been fully appreciated by teachers. Traditional methods of teaching language paid more attention to the features of language, the materials taught, or the way they were presented rather than to the learner and his individual characteristics. Recently with the increasing awareness regarding the 'learner variables' and the crucial role of the psychological and personality characteristics of the learners in educational activities, new techniques and methods of teaching should be devised.

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