A quantitative study of self confidence in learning English as a foreign language

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ABSTRACT

Self-confidence is a specific area of psychology related to the language learning process development. Learners are commonly exposed to situations that really block their learning process in a class of English as a foreign language. The purpose of this study is to describe the role that self-confidence factor plays when beginner students learn at the language department of Philosophy and Arts School from Autonomous University of Nuevo Leon. This quantitative study may provide information about important issues related to the role of self-confidence in an EFL course. It will offer helpful recommendations to teachers to get students involved in class and improve their language learning attitudinal factors about deducing what is necessary to be done in class.

Key words: Self-confidence, foreign language, affective factors, language learning.

INTRODUCTION

Affective factors have a great influence on students’ learning process, above all in the learning of a foreign language. At the same time, the language learning process can be influenced by different factors, such as educational systems, teaching and learning approaches, classroom conditions, educational technology, socio-cultural, students’ backgrounds as well as, emotional conditions of students and teachers (Eldred et al., 2004).

In order for students to communicate and interact in a foreign or second language they need to experience some aspects and play against fear of class exposure, delete previous negative experiences with speaking in class, experiment cultural beliefs and habits, take an active role in the classroom and handle the lack of confidence, among others. These factors are closely related, they affect each other either positively or negatively; in other words, if one of the factors increases or decreases, the others will follow in a direct relationship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several studies related to self-confidence around the world. One of the most recent is that reported by Iwamoto (2015) in Japan. This study named Effects of L2 (second language) affective factors on self-assessment of speaking had the objectives of getting the validity of students’ self-assessment of L2 oral performance, the influences of L2 affective variables on their self-assessment bias and the degree to which the influences of L2 affective variables differ between high and low proficiency learners. It followed a quantitative-qualitative methodology with the application of a questionnaire and students’ oral interviews using an oral assessment scale and students self-rating. Among the results, it can be observed that self-assessment of L2 speaking might not be a sufficiently reliable or consistent assessment tool. Therefore, if teachers are considering including self-assessment in a speaking class, self-assessment training should be conducted. Besides, after the L2 interview, students with higher self-esteem who had a positive view of themselves evaluated their grammar abilities higher, while those with lower self-esteem who had a negative view of themselves evaluated lower. Students who spoke English relatively fluently tended to evaluate their own fluency higher; then, foreign or second language self-confidence factor is a predictor to evaluate students performance.
EFL Instructors and students Writers’ Perceptions on Academic Writing Reluctance is a research conducted by Asadifard and Koosha (2013) in Iran. Its purpose was to discover the causes of the voluntary disengagement from students and instructors’ viewpoint. They applied a survey of motivation to engage with writing and a questionnaire of perception on writing reluctance. It was observed that when students feel their work may not be thoroughly checked, they gradually lose their interest in writing, consequently, reluctance might be the outcome. It was concluded that some of the possible causes of writing reluctance according to students are: Linguistic factors, psychological factors (low self-confidence, anxiety, fear of writing and low motivation) and methodological factors.

Bippus and Esfami (2013) made a research in the USA about Adult ESOL Students and Service Learning: voices, experiences and perspectives. This study focused on students’ perspectives regarding their oral communication skills. The instruments applied were student journals, reflection papers, projects, semi-structured interviews, and personal observations. The participants declared that they had gained confidence speaking in English. In other words, service learning brings authenticity to learning situations and students develop their communication skills through it since they become more active. It is important to mention that all students did the activities together. They were never alone and the teacher in charge of the group of students was always patient and friendly, available to help students and offer a measure of comfort.

One more interesting study was conducted by Chuan-Ta Chao (2003). His research: Foreign language anxiety and emotional intelligence: A study of EFL Students in Taiwan had the intention of examining the association between foreign language anxiety and emotional intelligence skills among private college students who learn English as a foreign language. The implemented instruments were two questionnaires: 1) Foreign language classroom anxiety scale and 2) Exploring and developing emotional intelligence skills. The results revealed that students with high foreign language anxiety have less control of their emotional intelligence (EI) skills and encounter more EI problems. On the other hand, students with low foreign language anxiety tend to employ their EI skills better and have a lesser degree of EI problems. These findings showed that enhancing one’s EI skills will also enhance one’s self-confidence and further decrease foreign language anxiety and raise learning in the target language.

Hence, students who are motivated to learn a language have a corresponding perception of self-confidence and it is teachers’ responsibility to encourage learners to boost their performance in a foreign or second language so they could interact in any exposed situation without being blocked.

Theoretical background

Learners are commonly exposed to situations that really block their learning process in a class of English as a foreign or second language. MacIntyre (1999) hypothesizes that in the context of second language learning, students with low self-confidence might tend to underestimate their ability to learn a second language and have negative expectations about their performance, in that way, feeling insecure or anxiety in the face of the language learning tasks is common for beginner students. Teachers, as facilitators need to be aware of their students’ problems so as to implement strategies in the classroom which might help them perform in the target language.

Krashen (1985) claims that foreign language learning process involves four different affective domains such as motivation, anxiety, attitude and self-confidence; the latter is the core concept in the development of this research. Similarly, Clement and Kruidenier (1985) stated that confidence, motivation and language ability are related learning dimensions in the field of the second language. Thus, analyzing these mentioned domains and factors involved in the process of second or foreign language learning, it can be observed that self-confidence plays a central role and has a strong relationship with motivation since students may sometimes feel anxious and experience some problems when communicating with others.

Self-confidence is also related to self-esteem. This can be observed through the definition provided by Branden (1994). He describes self-esteem as confidence in our ability to think and cope with the basic challenges of life. Confidence in our right to be successful and happy, the feeling of being worthy, deserving, entitled to assert our needs and wants and achieve our values. As a result, confidence is part of the connotation of self-esteem and at the same time self-esteem is an important aspect in the development of confidence towards foreign language learning. In addition to this assumption, Dörnyei (2005) expressed that the concept of self-confidence is closely related to self-esteem and both share a common emphasis on the individual’s perception of his or her abilities as a person.

Apart from the different definitions of self-confidence, Glenda and Anstey (1990) explained that many terms such as self-evaluation, self-satisfaction, self-appraisal, and self-confidence can be interchangeable. John and Srivastava (1999) highlighted self-confidence relating it to the Big Five personality dimension of extraversion, which, among other things, an energetic focus toward the social and material world, sociability and positive emotionality can be projected.

Glenda and Anstey (1990), Pierce et al. (1989), Brockner (1988) and Bandura (1982) mentioned that some factors to build general self-confidence points to self-confidence being derived from several features. The most important features are: 1) typical personal experiences; positive experiences increase self-confidence, while the negative experiences have the opposite effect and 2) social and friendly messages received from others, such as school,
community, peers and home are important for self-confidence improvement. Sending positive messages for others is thought to be detrimental to the development of high self-confidence, whereas, exposure to negative messages decreases the level of self-confidence. For sending messages, students need to interact with their peers. Yashima et al. (2004) claimed that students' willingness to be part of classroom activities can be determined by self-confidence.

Krashen (1985) claimed that language acquisition can take place in a nice atmosphere where self-confidence and motivation are promoted. This acquisition is a matter of attitude rather than aptitude, where students can get involved in the meaningful classroom activities that they might forget they are applying rules to communicate in a second or foreign language. This could happen if students are motivated to interact and have self-confidence. In other words, the affective filter should be low and the messages or input students receive should also be meaningful and comprehensible. In that way, students could acquire a foreign or second language because the input may get in as Krashen (1988) exclaimed that affective filters are a sort of psychological hurdles that refrain language learners from grasping the available comprehensible input accurately.

To highlight Krashen’s ideas, Du (2009) pointed out that the affective filter works as a stop light in the process of acquisition. When the student has no motivation, feels the lack of confidence and is worried about his/her failure the filter tends to be up. By the time the filter is completely down the learner is relaxed and tries so hard to become an active learner.

Lastly, Schutz (2007) stated that affective factors such as self-confidence, motivation and anxiety are important in the acquisition of a second language. Well-managed, all these factors might result in the building of self-confidence in the student as the main aspect in second language learning. If a student feels good in a language class, he or she might have more possibilities to reach a better level of proficiency.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The data collected from the questionnaires was examined according to Griffee’s confidence construct where three self-confidence variables: ability, assurance and willing engagement compounded it. The three sets were looked independently and the questionnaire results of the two applications compared. Thereafter, the results of the three sets were looked collectively to define which group of specific aspects of confidence has been most strengthened over the course.

Questions 1, 4, 7 and 9 are composed of the ability variable (Appendix). The results of question 1: Can I be interviewed in English indicated that 47% of students questioned in the first application agreed they could be interviewed in English. Hence, there was an increase in the ability to speak English as a foreign language. In the second application to the same students, the percentage was 60%, which meant a difference of 13% in this acquired skill at the end of the course and that they felt they could manage the target language. The results of question 4: Can I speak in English with foreign people measured students’ ability to speak English and showed an increase of 12% because the results of the first application were 27 and 39% in the second one, respectively.

In question 7: Can I show a visitor who speaks the English language all over the University Campus and answer questions about it? There was an increase of 11% because in the first application students showed 17% of agreement while at the end of the course their answer in agreement was 28%, surpassing the percentage obtained at the beginning of it. In response to questionnaire item 9, Can I give opinions in English when speaking with English
Appendix: Research questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/No.</th>
<th>Research questionnaire</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Can I be interviewed in English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Would I like to study in a country with an English language?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Do I like to speak English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Can I speak in English with foreign people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>When I speak English, do I feel cheerful and self-confident?</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Do I speak English easily?</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Can I show a visitor who speaks the English language throughout the University Campus and answer questions about it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Do I practice English with friends and family every day?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Can I give feedback in English when speaking with English speaking people?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Do I look for opportunities to speak English?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Do I speak English with groups of people who are foreign to my friends and family?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Do I feel relaxed when I speak English?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

speaking people?, there was a 9% increase due to the difference between the first application which was 27% up to 36% in the second application. It means students increased their level of confidence.

For measuring assurance variable, questions 3, 6, 11 and 12 were designed. The first item: I like to talk in English did not denote a change, neither in the first nor the second application. The 65% of the students chosen totally agreed on the Likert scale. Students’ responses to question 6: Do I speak English easily demonstrated a 13% increase at the end of the course, which is the difference between the 28% in the first application while they showed a 41% of increase in the second application. Students were in agreement about speaking English easily as a foreign language and undoubtedly a good increment of confidence in language management.

There was a slight increment in item 11: Do I speak English with groups of people outside my friends and family? Since the results indicated that a 12% of the students were in disagreement with speaking to unfamiliar people at the beginning of the semester, meanwhile the 11% of the students were in disagreement at the end of the course. Therefore, their level of fear decreased a 1% which meant students gained some more confidence. Then, measuring item 12: Do I feel relaxed when I speak English? it can be said that students agreed to feel more relaxed when they speak English as a foreign language. As it can be seen, there was a 5% difference between both applications, the first one showed a 47% while the second application reflected 52%. It all means students felt more comfortable and confident using the English language.

Willing engagement variable is integrated by questions 2, 5, 8 and 10. Based on the comparison of percentages attained in item 2: I would like to study in a country with English language, there was a 3% increase of confidence on students who wanted to study abroad in an English-speaking country, which reflects a positive change from the 67% of students who selected total agreement as an answer in the first application and during the second application they chose the same answer which showed 70% of students with confidence to live in a country whose native language is English. According to the results of item 5: When I speak English, do I feel happy and self-confident? (a) There was a positive change since students who selected total disagreement answer in the first application changed their opinions in the second phase and as such there was a reduction from 3 to 2% in the applications of the instrument.

Question 8: Do I practice English with friends and family every day also showed an increase of 7% of confidence management in students. This percentage is due to the difference between the first application which was 39% and the second application that was 46% of agreement. Lastly, an increase of 3% was shown in item 10 looking for opportunities to speak English indicating that there was a favorable increase in confidence management because 46% of the students selected the agreement choice in the first application and throughout the second application of the questionnaire there was an increment of 49% which reflects more confidence of students along the semester.

Some of the perceived results indicated that students are eager to use the language and they feel fairly confident; however, most of them do realize that they do not have the appropriate proficiency level to manage real situations in English. Even though they try so hard, they are down the road to progress in their learning. The study demonstrated that first level students show the common behaviors of beginner students when learning a second language, so their level of confidence is quite low.

In general, students show they feel more ability to speak English in week 14 rather than in week 3; this might be a consequence of being exposed to more knowledge about grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation. Students also reported feeling more comfortable when speaking English during the second application of the instrument, perhaps to the exposure to the target language and the practice in
the classroom. Results revealed a positive attitude toward feeling cheerful when speaking in an English country. Perhaps, this is due to the strategies teachers applied to make students learn and acquire the foreign language during the course. Students need to be motivated to gain confidence. There is a low increase in confidence but not enough to declare that participants are highly self-confident.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Even though participants show an increase in the management of emotional aspects in the second administration of the questionnaire, they are still afraid of speaking in the target language. Teachers play a very important role in language learning. Thus, they have to develop emotional factors in order to transmit them to students and make a pleasant and learning atmosphere in the classroom. This study strongly recommends teachers to develop activities that can engage students in class meaningfully.

Additionally, it is important that teachers create the right conditions in class to make students lower their anxiety level and encourage them to get involved through their participation. Once students are involved in class, their attitude towards language learning will increase and their self-confidence attained. Teachers should also provide students with appropriate feedback during and after classes to encourage them to take risks while they are in class; these motivational techniques could help go the extra mile and develop their self-confidence towards second language learning.

REFERENCES


