

Self-Esteem and Foreign Language Learning

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Edited by

Fernando Rubio



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This book is dedicated to Jane Arnold.
For her support, wit, enthusiasm, patience and love.

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FOREWORD

ELAINE K. HORWITZ
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Self-Esteem. Self-Concept. Self-Image. Self-Confidence. Anxiety. Willingness to Communicate. Language-Ego. Integrative Motivation. Acculturation. Language Learning Stories. Identity. Self. Selves. These are all terms that have been used in this volume and elsewhere to describe the relationship of learners to the endeavor of language learning and to the new language. We have truly come a long way from the early years of language aptitude research when the likelihood for success in language learning was conceived of primarily in cognitive terms. At this moment in language teaching history, the role of affective variables and the necessity of focusing on the emotional states of learners are readily acknowledged by the language teaching community. As this volume clearly attests, this understanding of the emotional vulnerability of language learners is shared by many language teachers and researchers around the world.

Questions remain, however, as to why language learning is so much more ego-involving than other fields of study, and moreover, what can be done to assist the learner's emotional journey. The authors in this volume have done an impressive job addressing these two issues; they offer a wealth of interesting and useful theoretical frameworks from which to understand the place of self-esteem in language learning as well as an abundance of truly creative and humanistic approaches to supporting and encouraging positive self-esteem in language classrooms. Many teachers intuitively understand the importance of supporting their students' self-esteem, but without the specific guidance offered in this volume, they are at a loss as to how to provide this support while at the same time accomplishing more conventional language teaching goals.

I like to think of language learning as a journey. All learners do not take the same route or travel at the same speed. When considering the learner's self-esteem, it is necessary to recognize that how learners feel about themselves and about language learning is likely to be different at different points in the language learning process (Horwitz 2008). It is not necessarily the case that more advanced learners will have higher levels of self-esteem. It is entirely

possible that as learners become more competent, they will also become more aware of limitations in their language ability. I have argued elsewhere (Horwitz 2000) that many learners experience anxiety when they feel that they are unable to “be themselves” when speaking a new language, and more advanced learners may actually be more sensitive to differences between their true identity and the version of themselves they can communicate in the new language (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope 1986). In terms of ultimate impact on language teaching, it is also important to recognize that lack of self-esteem in learners can in short order become a lack of confidence in language teachers. When advanced language learners become language teachers, low self-esteem can limit the experiences they offer to their students (Horwitz 1996).

The authors in this volume have made numerous suggestions as to how language teachers can help guide their students' language learning journey by incorporating reflection, group work, and discussion into language classrooms. To their voices, I would propose the addition of counseling components to language programs. Students could meet with a “counselor” when they begin language studies, throughout their studies, and again at the termination of their language studies. Language counseling would help students develop specific personal goals for language learning and a plan to reach their goals. Most importantly from the perspective of this volume, language counseling would help “legitimize” learner’s feelings and offer a regular forum to consider these feelings. While language counseling is seen as fundamental to self-directed language programs, it is seldom available to students in traditional school-based programs. In addition, since it is generally recognized that the amount of language proficiency that can be achieved in a classroom is limited, language teachers must encourage their students to take more responsibility for their own learning, that is, to become more autonomous. The development of autonomy in and of itself may be a source of self-esteem for many learners.

Learner feelings of self-esteem may also benefit from more realistic goals for language learners. I have often thought that language programs err by making native-like competence the goal for their students. My colleague Carl Blyth (2003) has written that language professionals should look to functioning bilinguals within various language communities as models for language learners rather than to native-speakers. By re-envisioning language teaching in this way, I believe that students will see more value in their language studies—they will come to understand that less than perfect competence can be very useful—and see themselves as more competent language learners. When learners compare themselves and are compared to native speakers, they will inevitably come up short. Such comparisons, in turn, likely contribute to poor self-esteem. When learners subscribe to common overly perfectionistic beliefs about language learning, they may erroneously interpret their progress as abnormally slow and

conclude that they lack aptitude for language learning (Gregersen and Horwitz 2002; Horwitz 1988).

The many roles, classroom levels, and cultural contexts of the contributors are a true strength of this volume. Many of the authors view themselves primarily as language teachers while others tend to see themselves more as researchers or teacher trainers. All are deeply rooted in and committed to language classrooms. Thus, the suggestions offered here are both practical and doable. I sincerely hope that language teachers will take these papers as a guide and find culturally appropriate ways to encourage positive self-esteem in their students.

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Fig. 4-2. The Components of Motivational Teaching Practice in the L2 Classroom (Dörnyei 2001, 29). Fig. 4-3. (Littlejohn 2001, 4). Fig. 4-4. Kohonen (1994, 61).

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PART I:

AN OVERVIEW

CHAPTER ONE

SELF-ESTEEM AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING: AN INTRODUCTION

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*This chapter introduces **Self-Esteem and Foreign Language Learning**. First, it briefly reviews the antecedents and the conceptual entity of self-esteem and then discusses the controversial effects some self-esteem programs have raised. The chapter then examines the influence of self-esteem in schools and specifically in the language classroom. A short review of each chapter of the book has also been included.*

1. Introduction

It was spring 2004 and I was attending a weekend course on self-esteem in the language classroom at El Molino, a lovely place hidden in the mountains of Huelva, in southern Spain. Veronica de Andrés, the presenter, stimulated my interest on the topic and showed some interesting classroom applications. She also stressed the importance of not considering self-esteem as a fashionable bandwagon to jump upon for a while, but rather an enduring concern for educators. Reflecting on the ideas we had been discussing, I felt that the topic certainly deserved serious research. However, I searched and found that there are no publications covering self-esteem in the foreign language classroom in a comprehensive manner, that is including theory, research and classroom applications. If the truth be told, there are very few articles dealing with self-esteem and the foreign language classroom.

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This book aims to bridge this gap between the areas of self-esteem and foreign language learning. In order to do so, it provides a theoretical background, a review of the existing literature and applications for classroom instruction.

2. Antecedents

Self-esteem is considered an indispensable concept in the literature of the social sciences (Wells and Marwell 1976). From William James' pioneer work in 1890 up to now, there exist thousands of studies that report the influence of self-esteem on human behaviour. Feelings of inadequacy, a sense of unworthiness, increased anxiety, depression, suicide, child abuse, mental disorders and other negative phenomena have been closely related to lack of self-esteem (Coopersmith 1967; Skager and Kerst 1989).

A considerable amount of research has also been carried out within the field of educational psychology, especially that which has been devoted to studying the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. Two main issues have been discussed:

1. Whether self-esteem is a cause or an outcome of academic achievement.
2. Whether correlations between both are positive, negative or insignificant.

Findings for both issues are diverse. Harter (1983), Beane and Lipka (1984), Chapman (1988), Marsh, Byrne and Shavelson (1988) maintain that self-esteem influences achievement; and a positive correlation is found in many studies (Solley and Stagner 1956; Covington 1989; Klein and Keller 1990; Rennie 1991; Auer 1992; Benham 1993; Lawrence 1996; Lerner 1996). Conversely, other studies sustain that self-esteem is mainly an outcome of achievement (Calysn 1971; Hoge, Smit and Crist 1995), or report a negative or absent correlation (Mecca, Smelser and Vasconcellos 1989; Roy et al. 2003).

This disparity of conclusions implies the difficulty involved in understanding the implications of the concept of self-esteem. As a matter of fact, numerous authorities have described it as an "impure phenomenon" (Mruk 1999, 34) connected to many other self-related phenomena and processes (Coopersmith 1967; Wiley 1974; Wells and Marwell 1976; Jackson 1984; Mecca et al. 1989; Ross 1992). Let us take a look at different conceptualizations.

3. What is self-esteem?

James (1890), White (1959), Coopersmith (1959) and (1967), Rosenberg (1965) and (1979), Branden (1969) and (1994), and Mruk (1999) and (2006) have been the main contributors to the development of the theoretical concept of self-esteem. Basically, their definitions point to six major components or dimensions of self-esteem:

- Competence and worthiness.
- Cognition and affect.
- Stability and openness.

Research indicates that all components are included to a certain degree and may affect a person depending on individual traits and context circumstances. *Competence* has been studied extensively under different labels (efficacy, success, etc.) and can be a major influence in school settings regarding academic achievement (Bandura 1987). Developmental psychology places the emergence of competence in middle childhood. On the other hand, *worthiness* develops in early childhood and comes originally from parental value, for instance, when parents show acceptance and approval after a child does something successfully. Worthiness is making judgment about oneself. Both phenomena exert influence on each other.

Also, part of the literature regarding the conceptualization of self-esteem has dedicated attention to whether to label it as being related to cognition or affect. Since evaluation is necessarily involved in our sense of worthiness and competence, cognition is then a central factor. However, neuro-scientific studies have shown that cognition and affect are distinct but inseparable (Schumann 1994) and have stressed the connections between the neocortex, involved in thinking and the limbic system which is related to emotions (cf. LeDoux 1996).

Finally, perhaps the most difficult issue researchers have faced on the conceptualization of self-esteem has been its dynamicity in terms of stability or openness. Is self-esteem open to change? Does change happen rapidly or slowly over time? In White's psychodynamic view, most openness occurs during childhood and then self-esteem becomes relatively stable, but still subject to change to a lesser degree. In that sense, self-esteem can fluctuate more than other stable characteristics like personality and intelligence (Sigelman and Shaffer 1995).

4. A definition of self-esteem

It is not my intention to add another definition of self-esteem here to the existing ones, but to briefly summarize the main components of the term. “The disposition to experience oneself as being competent to cope with the basic challenges of life and of being worthy of happiness” (Branden 1994) is one of the most accepted definitions. However, because self-esteem is a complex construct, a short definition cannot possibly grasp the whole concept and phenomenological process.

Basically, self-esteem is a psychological and social phenomenon in which an individual evaluates his/her competence and own self according to some values, which may result in different emotional states, and which becomes developmentally stable but is still open to variation depending on personal circumstances.

A definition is very “useful in making the distinction between authentic or healthy self-esteem and pseudo or unhealthy self-esteem” (Reasoner 2004), an issue to be dealt with in the next section.

5. Self-esteem and controversy

Many studies on self-esteem come from the USA. This has been in part due to the actions that have been carried out in schools as part of government programmes. Then, it is not surprising that political opponents and the media have taken any opportunity to criticize aspects of the programme which have had less than optimal results. This criticism, however, has led to discussion and development.

Most of the controversy could have been avoided if all involved had started from a sound definition. Most criticism comes from journalists, not always well informed, who misunderstand self-esteem as a phenomenon only related to worthiness². Possibly, the main misconception has been associating high-self esteem with certain negative behaviours, such as narcissism or aggression. Mruk’s matrix (1999, 164) is useful to comprehend the relationship between competence and worthiness and the resulting behaviours. Individuals can have a sense of high and low worthiness and competence combined in different ways:

- a. High worthiness and high competence leads to high or authentic self-esteem.
- b. High worthiness and low competence leads to Type I Defensive self-esteem, resulting in a self-centred behaviour.

² See instances in most articles at <http://www.illinoisloop.org/selfesteem.html>

c. Low worthiness and high competence leads to Type II Defensive self-esteem, resulting in overachieving behaviour.

d. Low worthiness and low competence leads to low self-esteem, resulting in negativistic behaviour.

In more extreme forms Types I and II can lead to narcissistic and antisocial behaviours respectively, and low self-esteem to depression. Thus it is not the case that individuals with high self-esteem show narcissistic behaviours.

Some of the criticisms of the anti-self-esteem movement may be legitimate since some school programs, probably implemented by uninformed educators, have tried to boost self-esteem artificially. For instance, praising students no matter what their effort or resulting work, instead of providing students with objective feedback and accurate evaluation of their competence. As Reasoner points out

Programs and efforts limited to making students feel good are apt to have little lasting effects, because they fail to strengthen the internal sources of self-esteem related to: integrity, responsibility and achievement. Only addressing these areas can one effectively build self-esteem (Reasoner 1992, 24).

It is one thing to discuss the ways self-esteem work has been implemented in the schools and another to deny that self-esteem is of vital importance to an individual. We may still need to find better ways to deal with self-esteem in the classroom, but there is no doubt from all research available that self-esteem is crucial for personal and academic growth.

6. Self-esteem development and school

Although personal development and behaviour is influenced by a large number of factors, parental involvement can be decisive (Coopersmith 1967). For instance, Rosenberg (1965), Coopersmith (1967), and Clark (1994) found a positive correlation between children with lower levels of self-esteem and parents who were indifferent toward their children or absent for short or long periods of time. Parental warmth, expectations, respect, consistency and birth order are other factors affecting the development of self-esteem (Mruk 1999).

In addition to the family context, social settings can have an important influence on self-esteem, especially during adolescence. However, the early school years are associated with the most influential stage for the development of self-esteem. Fostering adequate early patterns which lead to healthy self-esteem is very important. Research in psychology and the neurosciences shows that the years from childhood to adolescence comprehend the critical period for personal formation. While nurturing within the family is the most important factor in early childhood, school progressively gains importance as a

determining influence on the individual's self-esteem. In school, students are constantly evaluating their competence in classroom tasks and performances. Accordingly, self-efficacy, which is the perception people have about their competence, is fostered mainly in schools (Bandura 1987).

Inside the school context there are many factors that may affect the students' self-esteem. The type of subject to be learnt can be a significant issue, and specifically, learning a language. In the next section we will explore some of the reasons for this.

7. Self-esteem and the language classroom

Arnold (1999) and many other researchers refer to the importance of affect in the language classroom. Language learning is an anxiety-provoking experience for many students (Muchnick and Wolfe 1982; Horwitz et al. 1986; MacIntyre and Gardner 1991; Rubio 2004). As Horwitz et al (1991, 31) note,

The importance of the disparity between the "true" self as known to the language learner and the more limited self as can be presented at any given moment in the foreign language would seem to distinguish foreign language anxiety from other academic anxieties such as those associated with mathematics or science. Probably no other field of study implicates self-concept and self-expression to the degree that language study does.

Generally speaking, self-esteem is one of the central drives in human beings. When the level of self-esteem is low, the psychological homeostasis is unbalanced, creating insecurity, fear, social distance and other negative situations. Self-esteem can exercise a determining influence on a person's life, for good or bad; when there is very low self-esteem, this may even bring about a need for clinical treatment. However, though in the context of language learning low self-esteem is a non-clinical phenomenon, it can have serious consequences. Students may avoid taking the necessary risks to acquire communicative competence in the target language; they may feel deeply insecure and even drop out of the class.

Taking these effects into consideration, in the language classroom it is important to be concerned about learners' self-esteem. However, this implies more than doing occasional activities to make students reflect about their worthiness and competence. As a first step, teachers themselves need to be aware of their own self-esteem, to understand what self-esteem is, what are the sources and components, and how applications can be implemented in the language classroom. This implementation should be based on a valid framework. In this book, many authors have adopted Reasoner's model (1982), which comprises security, identity, belonging, purpose and competence as the

main components of self-esteem. Applications of a self-esteem model should be pre-planned in the teaching units and integrated within the foreign language curriculum.

8. Content of the book

Given that until now little has been written on self-esteem and the language learning context, this volume aims to bring together work on the topic that integrates both a theoretical and practical point of view, with the hope of attracting the interest of academic theoreticians and classroom teachers. While empirical research is not stressed in the book, hopefully researchers will also find inspiration for carrying out studies which can further illuminate the field.

This book is organized into three main parts. Part I serves as an introduction to self-esteem. Part II is dedicated to report the existing literature on the theory and research dealing with self-esteem in the language classroom. Finally, Part III includes general procedures for implementation and a wide range of activities for classroom applications.

Jane Arnold explores in Chapter 2 the territory giving an account of the connection between self-esteem and the affective domain in the language classroom. She stresses the importance of focussing on what is happening inside the learner rather than on other external elements in order to achieve goals for language learning, pointing out the importance of beliefs for the learning process. After analysing what realistic implementation should be, Arnold introduces Reasoner's model of self-esteem components and gives examples of how to deal with each in the language classroom.

In Chapter 3, Veronica de Andrés, one of the first researchers in the field of self-esteem and language learning, reports her experience with self-esteem implementation programs. Apart from explaining some of the theory regarding self-esteem, she includes a description of an action-research project, which includes details of the procedures used and examples of activities to promote self-esteem.

In Chapter 4 Javier Ávila delves further into the theoretical aspects of self-esteem. He reviews the existing literature, offering evidence that levels of self-esteem in the language classroom have impact on other process phenomena, such as motivation, anxiety, information processing, and learner autonomy.

From Avila's individual perspective on self-esteem Chapter 5 moves on to a more social or collective one. Sonia Casal describes the social dimension of self-esteem in the language classroom and claims that group work in itself does not necessarily foment socializing and learning. Cooperative work, where there is interdependence, is a step in the right direction. She specifies that classroom activities which incorporate goal interdependence, resource interdependence and

role interdependence can help to foster healthy self-esteem on a personal and a social dimension.

In Chapter 6, Ana Ortega examines the relationship between self-esteem and anxiety. Both phenomena exert influence on each other and affect students in a subtle way so that they avoid participating in class.

Chapter 7 studies the role of self-esteem in adolescents. Carmen Fonseca and Carmen Toscano explain that the difficulties involved in teaching teenagers may well relate to the special characteristics of learners in this age group who are involved in a critical period for the construction of their identity. After presenting an analysis of different factors affecting adolescents, they offer Smith's model as a guide to improving teenagers' attitudes towards learning a foreign language.

Andrew Wright offers in Chapter 8 an analysis of the connection between self-esteem and storytelling. Following an introspective method and relying on his extensive experience in the world of language teaching, Wright explains that storytelling helps in the creation of positive values that would eventually form part of a person's identity. He also gives an account of how to create, adapt and apply stories in the language classroom with the aim of enhancing self-esteem.

In Chapter 9 Marina Arcos provides a wide range of activities to develop children's self-esteem. She suggests that through these activities young learners both improve their self-concept and acquire English in a way that is personally meaningful and thus more effective for learning. Chapter 10 presents some ideas and activities for enhancing teenagers' self-esteem in the language classroom. Eva Díaz and Concha Julián also include some tips for classroom procedures, taking into account the difficult age students are going through and their resulting problematic behaviour in the classroom.

Finally, Chapter 11 turns our attention to teachers. Inmaculada León deals with the topic of teachers confirmation, which is described as the process by means of which teachers make students feel valued, recognized and acknowledged. She also examines some of the problems that affect teachers today and offers a scale of teacher behaviours that lead to confirmation.

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CHAPTER TWO

SELF-CONCEPT AND THE AFFECTIVE DOMAIN IN LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Recent years have seen the growth of interest in affective factors, which influence the process of language learning in many ways. These may be of a facilitating or inhibiting nature and can often determine the outcome of this process. In the classroom affect may be apparent in the relationships established there but it may also relate to learner-internal aspects, and one of the most prominent of these is self-esteem. Learners' self-concept—their perception of themselves, what they see when they look “inside”—and their self-esteem—their evaluation of this self-concept and their affective experience of it—are closely related to their learning. In this chapter we will explore how they influence language learning and see some implications for the classroom.

1. Affect and learning. The role of self-concept

There can be no doubt today about the importance of affect for learning. As Rodríguez, Plax and Kearney (1996, 297) explain, “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 how success in this process depends “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 organize the area of affect in language learning

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and teaching, where we can consider that there are two basic aspects, the “inside”, or internal characteristics which are a part of the learner’s personality, and the “between”, or the relational factors which focus on learners and teachers as participants in an interactional situation (Arnold and Brown 1999). Among the learner internal factors, of central importance is the image we form of ourselves, our self-concept. As human beings, at all times and in all places we inevitably form an image of self. How we evaluate that self—negatively or positively—will determine our self-esteem. Researchers in communication studies, an area very relevant for language teaching, affirm that “the overwhelming conclusion from both research and theory is that the perceptions one has of self significantly affect attitudes, behaviours, evaluations, and cognitive processes. In classroom research the concept an individual has of self has also played an important role” (McCroskey et al. 1977, 269).

In an early approach to the topic Coopersmith (1967, 4-5) described self-esteem in this way:

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 the 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 attitudes the individual holds towards himself; it is a subjective experience which the individual conveys to others by verbal reports and other overt expressive behavior.

Based on work by researchers such as Coopersmith, Reasoner (1982) and others, the incorporation of a concern with self-esteem has proved to be an important direction in education. Yet in the process it may have come to be considered a band-wagon to jump on or even a panacea which is alleged to be able to solve complex problems that have very diverse and unrelated roots. Thus, there have been misunderstandings of the essence of work on self-esteem in education. Critics have affirmed that dealing with self-esteem can lead to egocentric behaviour and to unrealistic expectations. However, for productive work on self-esteem it goes without saying that what is being considered is what we could term “healthy” self-esteem, where students have both a positive, **accurate** belief about themselves and their abilities and also the **commitment** and **responsibility** that comes when they see themselves as able to complete worthwhile goals. It is never a case of giving students false beliefs or of telling them that “anything goes”. Quite the contrary, work with self-esteem and other affective issues is connected to providing a supportive atmosphere in which we can better encourage learners to work hard to reach their learning potential unhindered by the negative affect Krashen (1982) referred to with his metaphor of the affective filter.

Rosenberg, the originator of one of the most commonly used self-esteem measurement scales, adds an important point in his formulation of the concept: “High self-esteem... expresses the feeling that one is *good enough*. The individual simply feels that he is a person of worth; he respects himself for what he is, but *does not stand in awe of himself nor does he expect others to stand in awe of him*” (Rosenberg 1965, 30-1, emphasis added). So it is not, as some have affirmed, a case of an unhealthy ego. What we are referring to is a balanced view of self worth from which it is easier to carry out learning tasks in whatever subject matter of the curriculum we are dealing with.

2. Self-esteem and beliefs

Self-esteem can, as Rosenberg (1965, 15) states, be thought of as one’s *attitude* towards oneself. Secord and Backman (1964) use three categories to define our attitude about something: *affective* (our feelings about it), *behavioural* (how we behave regarding it), and *cognitive* (our beliefs about it). To reframe this somewhat in the context of language learning, we could say that our attitude about the self as a language learner includes what we believe (“I am capable of learning the language” or “I can never learn”) which leads to our feelings about the learning process (“pleasure” or “pain”) and this in turn will determine our behaviour (approaching or avoiding opportunities to further our learning).

Puchta (1999b, 66) has stressed the importance of beliefs for any learning experience. “Beliefs are strong perceptual filters. They serve as explanations for what has happened and they give us a basis for future behaviour”. They are so influential in the learning process because they operate on the level of our identity. Thus, if we, for example, correct students’ errors in an insensitive manner, what they may perceive is not that we have given them an opportunity to see how to bring their interlanguage closer to the target norm, but instead that we have reinforced their belief that they are not capable of learning the target language or even that they are not valuable human beings. Their identity and their self-esteem are compromised, they may become unwilling to try again, and future learning experiences will be less productive.

Low self-concept makes it hard to be fully on task, as energy is split between the task and an excessive concern with a belief about one’s lack of ability or worth. It creates a doubly disadvantaged learning situation: there is less energy for the task at hand and the negative feelings generated make the learning experience unpleasant, less motivating and thus less effective. Ehrman and Dörnyei (1998, 257) point out that according to motivation theory, “the highest human priority is the need for self-acceptance”. Thus, we cannot ignore this factor in any activity that is as motivation-dependent as language learning.

A student who has formed a belief that he can't learn languages is right—he can't... unless he changes this belief. As long as he maintains it, he may even have a vested interest in doing poorly. It may be that in the language classroom all he has left to protect his self-concept is the small satisfaction that comes from being right about something: his failure proves he made a correct appreciation of his language ability. Deutsch and Solomon (1959) have shown that an individual with low self-esteem may view a negative evaluation by others of himself as more favourable than a high evaluation. Puchta (1999a, 257) maintains that “negative beliefs influence our student’s expectations. Low expectations lead to a low level of motivation and every failure is seen as confirmation of the initial beliefs”. The inner speech or self-talk of this type of individual may go something like this: “I’m right again. I am a terrible language learner. I knew it right from the start”. This feeling that is generated does not depend on objective, observable facts but on our beliefs, often very subjective, but, for this very reason, fortunately amenable to change.

There are different ways to change, to reframe these limiting beliefs. One possibility is through mental imagery. Brown (1991, 86) presents students who are trying to learn to speak a foreign language with what he calls the visualization game: “Visualize yourself speaking the language fluently and interacting with people. Then when you are actually in such a situation, you will, in a sense have been there before”. As there exists a very close relationship between our feelings and our mental images, including self-images, if students experience a strong mental image of themselves performing language learning tasks successfully, this can reduce negative beliefs and provide a good starting point for effective bottom up work on the language.

In psychology the concept of “ideal selves” is very relevant here. As Markus and Ruvolo (1989, 213) claim, “imagining one’s own actions through the construction of elaborated possible selves achieving the desired goal may thus directly facilitate the translation of goals into intentions and instrumental actions”. Dörnyei (2005, 102) cites further work by Ruvolo and Markus (1992) where they “provide empirical evidence that imagery manipulations (in their case, asking participants to imagine themselves as successful or unsuccessful before a task) increased the accessibility of possible selves and this was reflected in the subjects’ performance”. He applies this idea to language learning where the concept he proposes of the *Ideal L2 Self* can broaden our understanding of motivational factors at work in a wider variety of learning situations than other models which are closely tied to a context in which the learner has significant contact with the L2 outside the classroom. Describing his model of the L2 motivational self system, Dörnyei (2005, 106) concludes that “if the person we would like to become speaks an L2, the *ideal L2 self* is a powerful motivator to learn the L2 because of the desire to reduce the discrepancy between our actual and ideal selves”. Thus, if in our

students' image of the self they want to become, they include an aspect of successful language learning, this can provide strong support for the learning process. Teachers can help to develop this self-image by, on the one hand, helping to make being a L2 speaker seem attractive and, on the other, making it seem possible through their encouragement and by stressing that if learners are willing to work to learn the L2, they will be successful in doing so.

There is conclusive research evidence that self-concept determines behaviour. What students feel about themselves will affect the way they approach the learning experience and also their relationships with others. Connecting with many previous studies, the research of Brown and Smart (1991) with university students showed that subjects who conceived of themselves as kind and helpful exhibited prosocial behaviour. They also found that those with high self-esteem, even after failure, were more capable of maintaining a positive view of self. Subjects with low self-esteem not only had difficulty in reaffirming their self image after failure, they then showed a tendency to act in a selfish manner. They concluded that "self-representations appear to play a critical role in guiding and regulating behavior" (p. 373), an idea which has important implications beyond the individual and beyond the classroom given the possibility that "ultimately social change may be effected by affecting the self" (p. 375).

3. Enemies of a positive self-concept

In language learning, more than in most other areas of the curriculum, our self-concept can often be truly endangered. When we are trying to learn a second language, the self is especially vulnerable because it is deprived of its normal, familiar vehicle of expression. In fact, *language shock* may occur when learners "fear that their words in the target language do not reflect their ideas adequately, perhaps making them appear ridiculous or infantile" (Arnold and Brown 1999, 21-22).

When students are learning a foreign language, speaking in the language involves taking risks. In any situation we may be judged by what we say. Since we know that when we speak in the foreign language we cannot yet express ourselves fluently, we see the self that we present as a limited version of our real self. If the classroom atmosphere is not supportive, it will be that much more difficult for students to take the necessary risks involved in attempting to communicate. Teachers often underestimate the discomfort students experience when required to display their ability to speak in the language in front of their peers. Insistence by the teacher on unrealistic models of perfection will only increase their feeling of self-consciousness and inadequacy. In no way is this to say that we do not demand the best of our students, but we cannot get the best from them if there is affective interference in their cognitive processing. There are many enemies of self-esteem

in the classroom. Hoffman (1999) discusses some of them: labelling, criticism, sarcasm, put downs, comparisons, and evaluating the person rather than the behaviour. If these are not avoided, learners' self-concept will not be protected in the classroom.

In language learning and use communication in the language is a vital factor, but oral communication in the foreign language has been shown to be especially anxiety provoking (Horwitz et al. 1991). In the field of communication studies oral communication apprehension has been shown to be associated with low self-esteem (McCroskey et al. 1977), and it is highly plausible that in the specific context of second language learning the relationship would be even stronger, given the added difficulty of formulating one's message in a language one does not totally control.

4. A realistic view of self-esteem for the language classroom

In the language classroom attention to self-esteem can help to direct learner energy which has been diverted from the learning task and focused on non-productive identity beliefs back to a state which is productive for acquisition. However, it is extremely important to make clear from the outset that work with self-esteem does not include empty praise, which may create unreasonable expectations and an inaccurate sense of reality. Confidence comes from competence. Realistic concern with learner self-esteem in the language classroom does not focus on creating false beliefs of a positive nature to replace the negative ones. Rather, it is a question of providing learners with the means to succeed in their language learning while at the same time reducing any limiting false beliefs about their worth and their abilities that keep them from reaching their potential. Learners must both *be* competent and *feel* competent. Similarly, we cannot lead students to expect the road toward language learning to be free of obstacles. Obstacles exist and they help us develop our muscles as we overcome them. Once again, effective work with self-esteem must be realistic.

Lozanov has pointed out that positive suggestion can be useful up to a point, as it can exercise a placebo effect on the learners, helping them to put any negative beliefs about themselves on hold. However, the placebo must then be supported by the feedback on the learners' ability that comes from real accomplishment (Hooper Hansen 1999). In Suggestopedia, for example, it is claimed that the real reinforcement for learners' self-esteem comes from the facilitation of more efficient learning. Learners need to be aware of their worthiness and capabilities, but more effective than telling them they are capable is helping them to experience how well they can learn.

Self-esteem is, we have seen, important for learning. But can we really do anything about it? Many, like Underhill (1989), feel that in doing work in areas of