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Frames of reference used by language learners in forming their self-concepts

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Abstract

This article reports on research designed to investigate the factors influencing the development of learner self-concepts in the foreign language domain. Although the SLA literature contains numerous indirect references to self-concept and recognises its central importance in language learning, very little empirical study of the construct has been conducted within the field. Therefore, an open exploratory research approach was taken, in order to examine the specific nature of the construct in this domain. Qualitative data were generated with four separate data sources in a European, tertiary-level EFL setting. The emergent data were analysed in line with a grounded theory approach.

The findings confirm but importantly extend the current dominant internal and external (I/E) frame of reference model in respect to the domain of foreign language learning. The analysis reveals the complex interrelations between various frames of reference and other psychological processes in language learner self-concept formation. In addition to the frames incorporated in the model, the findings also highlight the role played by learners' other foreign language self-concepts, their belief systems about language learning and their affective responses to experiences in using and learning the language in both formal and informal contexts.

Dieser Beitrag präsentiert Ergebnisse einer Untersuchung zu den Faktoren, welche die Herausbildung eines Lernenden-Selbstkonzeptes beim Fremdsprachenerwerb beeinflussen. Obwohl die Literatur zum FS-Erwerb eine Reihe von indirekten Verweisen auf den Begriff 'Selbstkonzept' enthält und die zentrale Bedeutung dieses Konzepts für das Erlernen von Sprachen anerkannt ist, gibt es dazu in diesem Bereich bisher sehr wenig empirische Forschung. Daher wurde in der vorliegenden Studie ein offener explorativer Forschungsansatz gewählt, um die besonderen Eigenschaften dieses Konzepts in diesem Bereich zu untersuchen. Es wurden qualitative Daten aus vier unterschiedlichen Quellen in einem tertiären europäischen EFL-Rahmen erhoben. Die daraus gewonnenen Daten wurden mittels eines 'Grounded Theory'-Ansatzes analysiert.

Die Ergebnisse bestätigen das derzeit vorherrschende interne und externe (I/E) Referenzrahmenmodell in Bezug auf den Bereich Fremdsprachenlernen nicht nur, sie erweitern diese Modell grundlegend. Die Analyse zeigt die komplexen Beziehungen zwischen diversen Referenzrahmen und anderen, psychologischen Prozessen in der Herausbildung des Selbstkonzepts von Fremdsprachenlernenden auf. Zusätzlich zu den Rahmen, die im Modell inkorporiert sind, unterstreichen die Ergebnisse außerdem die Rolle von weiteren Selbstkonzepten beim Lernen anderer Fremdsprachen für die Lernenden, die Wichtigkeit ihrer Überzeugungen bezüglich des (Fremd-)Sprachenlernens, und ihrer affektiven Reaktionen auf Erfahrungen beim Lernen und bei der Verwendung von Sprache(n) sowohl in formellen, wie auch in informellen Kontexten.

Quest'articolo presenta una ricerca mirata ad investigare i fattori che influenzano lo sviluppo del concetto di sé dell'apprendente, nell'ambito della lingua straniera. Nonostante la letteratura riguardante la SLA (acquisizione della seconda lingua) contenga numerosi riferimenti indiretti al concetto di sé e ne riconosca la centrale importanza nell'apprendimento della lingua, sono pochi gli studi empirici eseguiti a

tal riguardo. Di conseguenza, un approccio di ricerca investigativa è stato adottato al fine di esaminare la natura specifica del costrutto personale in quest'ambito. I dati qualitativi sono stati raccolti utilizzando quattro fonti indipendenti di dati in un contesto europeo di inglese come lingua straniera a livello universitario. I dati ottenuti sono stati analizzati in linea con un approccio di 'grounded theory'. I risultati confermano e, in modo altrettanto importante, estendono l'attuale e principale struttura interna ed esterna (I/E) di riferimento dell'apprendimento della lingua straniera. L'analisi rivela le complesse interrelazioni tra diversi ambiti di riferimento e altri processi psicologici nella formazione del concetto di sé in uno studente di lingua straniera. Oltre alle strutture di riferimento incorporate nel modello, i risultati evidenziano l'importanza del ruolo svolto dal concetto di sé di altre lingue straniere, l'importanza del sistema di fiducia nell'apprendimento della lingua straniera e l'importanza delle reazioni affettive dell'apprendente a esperienze di utilizzo e apprendimento della lingua sia in contesti formali sia informali.

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Introduction

Being an effective language teacher and helping learners to learn a foreign language is a challenging undertaking in which complexity is the norm rather than the exception. A key ingredient for its success is being able to understand and interpret learner needs, thoughts, feelings, motives and behaviours. As such, psychology lies at the heart of all teaching and learning processes and possibly plays an even greater role in language learning than in other academic undertakings due to the special character of this skill-based domain with its unique social, interactional and communicative demands. Therefore, if we wish to enhance our students' language learning and ensure that we are effective teachers, then an appreciation of psychology sensitive to the special character of this domain is absolutely essential.

A central construct in psychology which has already been assigned a crucial role in successful learning is self-concept. Its importance has been extensively attested to within educational psychology, and a considerable body of research has indicated its positive relationship to key variables such as achievement, motivation, anxiety, goal setting, strategy use, persistence, attributions and self-regulated learning (see, e.g., Guay & Vallerand 1997; Marsh & Yeung 1997; Muijs 1997; Wigfield & Karpathian 1991). Indeed, "the idea that students' self-beliefs play a central role in their academic success is so widely accepted that self-constructs are a regular staple in studies of academic motivation" (Pajares & Schunk 2005: 95). Although the self in various forms has increasingly become a central feature of theoretical models in SLA (see, e.g., Dörnyei 2005; MacIntyre et al. 1998; Woodrow 2006), studies focusing explicitly and in depth on self-concept remain relatively scarce (cf. Mercer 2011). This study aims at examining this central psychological construct in respect to the language learning domain and will consider which frames of reference appear to affect its development.

Defining self-concept for SLA

Research investigating self-concept has been hampered by three sets of difficulties: Firstly, there have been problems stemming from confusion over overlapping, interrelated terminology; secondly, the field has been beset by problems resulting from differing understandings about the theoretical composition of the concept; and finally, there have been difficulties arising simply from the intrinsic complexity and multidimensional nature of the construct. As Brinthaupt and Lipka (1992: 1) explain, there remains "wide disagreement about how to define the self, measure it, and study its development". However, despite the methodological challenges it presents, the importance assigned to the construct within psychology means that researchers and educators in SLA need to attempt to understand its nature and development within the language learning context.

In this study, self-concept is defined as a psychological construct which represents a person's cognitive and affective evaluative beliefs about themselves (Pajares & Schunk 2005). Rather than being conceptualised as unidimensional, self-concept is understood as a multifaceted construct that functions in domain-specific terms, i.e., self-beliefs are grouped to reflect a particular field, area or academic subject (e.g., Byrne 1996; Marsh, Byrne & Shavelson 1988). For example, a learner's English as a Foreign Language (EFL) self-concept is an individual's self-perception of competence and their self-evaluative judgements in the EFL domain.

For research and pedagogical clarity, it is important to differentiate self-concept from closely related terms; three of the most widely used in SLA are self-efficacy, self-esteem and identity. Self-esteem and self-efficacy differ from self-concept largely in their degrees of specificity and also the relative importance of the cognitive/ evaluative self-beliefs involved (Mercer 2009, 2011). Self-efficacy is an expectancy belief (Bandura 1997) which is tightly domain-specific and the most cognitive of the constructs. In contrast, self-esteem is the most evaluative of the terms and tends to be generally considered to be a more global construct (Harter 1999). Whilst identity and self-concept are closely interrelated, they differ primarily in terms of focus (Mercer

2011). Self-concept is conceptualised as an individual's inner psychological sense of self in a specific domain and is not bound to a particular context, whereas identity focuses an individual's sense of self in relation to a specific context or community of practice.

Importance of self-concept for language learning

Although self-related constructs are widely recognised as playing a central role in learners' success in any academic undertaking, it is possible that a learner's self-concept may play an even greater role in language learning compared to other subjects, given the close links between language and self such as the heightened role of self-presentation in foreign language use and issues of social and cultural identity (Mercer 2011: 3). Indeed, Cohen & Norst (1989: 61) claim that their research shows that "there is something fundamentally different about learning a language, compared to learning another skill or gaining other knowledge, namely, that language and self are so closely bound, if not identical, that an attack on one is an attack on the other". The strongly "social nature" of language learning is stressed by Williams & Burden (1997: 115) who explain that, "language, after all, belongs to a person's whole social being; it is a part of one's identity, and is used to convey this identity to other people." As such, it is possible that self-concept plays an even more critical role in processes of language learning and, therefore, it ought to be a key goal to better understand how learners think and feel about themselves in respect to this domain.

In SLA, there has been growing interest in various expressions of self and these constructs form a core part of many studies in the area of learner individual differences. The most commonly used constructs include self-efficacy (e.g., Hsieh & Schallert 2008; Mills et al. 2007), L2 linguistic self-confidence (e.g., Clément et al. 2001; Rubenfeld et al. 2006), identity (e.g., Morita 2004; Norton 2000) and self-representations (Pellegrino 2005). In particular, the introduction of the 'L2 motivational self system' model of motivation (Dörnyei 2005; Dörnyei & Ushioda 2009) has been instrumental in drawing attention to the role of self-concept in motivational terms. As Csizér & Kormos (2009: 109–110) conclude, "our research underlines the importance of self-concept in affecting motivated behaviour and shows that self-regulated behaviour is hardly possible unless students have a positive image of themselves as users of another language". However, surprisingly, there remains relatively little in-depth work focusing in detail and explicitly on the nature of and development of self-concept in the foreign language domain and it is this gap that this study hopes to partly fill (cf. Henry 2009; Mercer 2011).

Psychology-based research into self-concept formation

Given the absence of detailed studies into self-concept formation in the foreign language domain, it is necessary to turn to psychology-based literature to examine what insights have been gained there in respect to self-concept formation in general. A range of factors have already been examined in respect to their roles in self-concept formation processes and one key factor believed to affect one's self-concept is one's prior achievements. This can be seen in the 'Reciprocal Effects Model' (REM) in which self-concept and achievement are reciprocally related and mutually reinforcing (Marsh 1990; Marsh & Yeung 1997). In other words, the REM model proposes that prior self-concept affects subsequent achievement, but also prior achievement affects self-concept development. Other factors believed to influence self-concept include direct feedback from and reflected appraisals of others. The idea that individuals are believed to construct their self-concepts based on how they believe others perceive and judge them in a particular context can be found in the early work of the symbolic interactionists (Cooley 1902; Mead 1934). This 'mirrored' image from others can come from explicit feedback such as teachers' grades, but it may also stem from the perceived reflected appraisals of significant others, which an individual interprets or deduces from their behaviour or interactions (Marshall & Weinstein 1984; Weinstein 2002) and which may be accurate or inaccurate (Felson 1985).

Another factor known to influence self-concept formation concerns the effects of social comparisons. Whilst social comparisons may to a certain degree be spontaneous, unconscious processes (Gilbert, Giesler & Morris 1995) resulting in both an affective and cognitive reaction in the individual, social comparisons may also be consciously directed by a learner depending on their self-related needs. Individuals can either have the need to (1) accurately self-assess their abilities, (2) self-enhance or improve their sense of self, or (3) self-protect and maintain a sense of consistency in their self-concept (cf. Mruk 2006). Thus, individuals may engage in upward social comparisons, comparing themselves with those perceived as better than themselves, or downward social comparisons, with those considered less able (see, e.g., Collins 1996; Wills 1981), in order to satisfy these needs. This suggests that who individuals compare themselves with and the effects of these comparisons represents an area of considerable complexity.

An important additional factor was proposed by Marsh (1986) who suggested that learners form their self-concepts through evaluations based on both internal and external frames of reference. External (normative) frames of reference involve some of the factors outlined above, such as grades and social comparisons, and are defined by Marsh (2006: 40) as being when, "students compare their self-perceived performances in a particular school subject with the perceived performances of other students in the same school subject and other external standards of actual achievement levels". Internal (ipsative-like) frames of reference involve students comparing "their own performance in one particular subject with their own performances in other school subjects" (Marsh 2006: 40).

The Internal/External (I/E) frame of reference model (Marsh 1986) was developed with the main purpose of attempting to explain how learners tend to form distinct and potentially contrasting self-concepts in two subjects such as maths and English, despite possessing similar levels of skills in these domains. The model suggests that in addition to the various external frames of reference already widely accepted as being influential, learners also use internal frames of reference and thus, compare their perceived abilities across subjects when forming their self-concept in a particular domain. The effects of this comparison can lead learners to strengthen one of their self-concepts and subsequently weaken the other, despite possessing potentially similar actual levels of ability.

The I/E model, in particular its internal frame of reference dimension, has made a major contribution towards an understanding of self-concept formation, given its recognition of the interaction between both internal and external processes. However, Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2002) propose that the processes underlying self-concept formation are likely to be even more complex. They suggest that learners use multiple frames of reference and sources of information in a variety of combinations and stress the manifold possible combinations of frames of reference used by learners to construct their self-concepts (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2002: 240). Little research has been done to extend the I/E model beyond the two main frames of reference it currently encompasses, as much of the research into self-concept development has tended to employ statistical methods, which are perhaps less likely to reveal any unanticipated findings or instances of variation. As Marsh, Kong & Hau (2001: 552) conclude, "most I/E research has been quantitative in nature, but this seems an ideal area to pursue rigorous qualitative research to better understand the nature of the comparison processes students actually use in the formation of academic self-concepts in different areas".

For these reasons a qualitative, grounded-theory study was deemed especially appropriate for understanding the situated nature of self-concept and the potential range of processes affecting its formation in the relatively under-researched language learning domain. It was hoped that an in situ exploratory investigation of this kind would help to reveal any additional, possibly unexpected factors affecting self-concept development. Whilst the study focuses on the EFL domain, given the recognised need for domain-specificity in respect to self-concept research (Marsh 2006), it is believed the findings will be of relevance to a range of foreign language learner self-concepts not just regarding English.

Methodology

An open, exploratory approach was taken to investigating the following broad research question:

> *What frames of reference appear to influence the development of EFL learner self-concepts in a tertiary-level context?*

In order to answer this question, holistic, situated data were generated from a number of sources within an Austrian university-level EFL learning setting. Four different data-generation methods were used and none of the research participants took part in more than one form of data generation: a longitudinal single case study, in-depth interviews, written narratives and learner autobiographies. In this way, the research aimed for methodological triangulation through multiple sources of data and using multiple methods (Denzin 1989). Various aspects regarding the rationale for the methodology and findings from these data have been reported on in more detail elsewhere (Mercer 2009, 2011).

All of the data were generated with tertiary-level learners who were studying English as their major subject, either on its own or in combination with other subjects at an English department at an Austrian university. Any student may study English at university in Austria, irrespective of their non-standardised school-leaving certificate grades, and consequently abilities often vary among such learners, although the official university admission level is B2 according to the European Common Framework of Reference.[1] All of the students must take the same language courses in approximately the same chronological order. Although a stay abroad is not a compulsory part of a language degree at this particular department, many students do make use of optional study programmes and exchange schemes.

Longitudinal case study

The case study data were generated over the course of 2 academic years through a series of 21 in-depth, informal interviews which were also supplemented by 3 written narratives. At the start of the study the participant was a 20-year-old female EFL student majoring in English with Italian as her second subject, training to become a teacher. In this article, I will refer to her using the pseudonym she selected, 'Joana'. A longitudinal case study was selected given its suitability for exploring unique, subtle, complex or dynamic themes (Yin 2003), such as learner self-concept development. Studies of this type are also particularly useful for retaining the perspective of the participant as well as some of the real life complexity in situ (Yin 2003).

Interviews

The participants in the interviews were 12 volunteer students (10 female, 2 male) who were at various stages in their university language studies. All were Austrian nationals aged between 19 and 24. The interviews ranging in length from just under half an hour to over 90 minutes were conducted in English and addressed the same topics based on open guidelines. The interviews were only carried out once, but participants were informed about the content in general terms a week in advance, in order to allow them time to reflect more fully beforehand. Interviews were selected for their particular suitability for accessing inner perspectives, "to find out those things which we cannot directly observe" (Patton 1990: 278) and as an ideal way of capturing the complexities of individual's perceptions and experiences. They provide an excellent opportunity for the interviewer to probe further into participants' responses and potentially gain a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the phenomena under investigation.

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1   See: http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf (p. 24) [Access date: 05.05.10]

Written narrative self-descriptions

The third set of data were written narrative self-descriptions collected from a group of 63 EFL students attending three parallel first year language classes. Based on findings from pilot study data, broad, open-ended guidelines entitled 'me as a language learner' were used in order to help ensure the relevance of the content of the texts. Texts ranged in length from between half a page to 2 pages and learners wrote texts at home to allow them time to reflect more fully on the content. Narratives were felt to be especially useful for understanding learner self-concepts given that people tend to construct narratives that "support their interpretation of themselves" (Sinclair Bell 2002: 209).

Learner autobiographies

The final data set were language learner autobiographies written by a group of 26 EFL learners (3 male, 23 female) attending a class in the final stage of their studies. Participants were in at least their third year of studies and thus, were expected to have had longer, potentially more varied language learning histories on which to report. Once again, the students were provided with open-ended guidelines entitled 'language learning history' to help focus the content of their texts. The shortest of the resultant texts was 1 page in length and the longest was 5 pages; on average, learners wrote approximately 2 pages. As a form of narrative, much of the same rationale for their use was also of relevance; however, they are also particularly useful for revealing perceived connections between events and coherence to life story threads (Clandinin & Connelly 2000), which was one of the main focus in terms of self-concept development.

Data analysis

The data generated were all transcribed, digitalised and then analysed line-by-line with the aid of Atlas.ti software, in order to detect main trends and other features. In this study, a grounded theory approach to data analysis was employed (Charmaz 2006; Strauss & Corbin 1998). Coding and analysis of the data was not a linear process, but the researcher constantly visited and re-visited the data and codes during the study until these were exhausted or "saturated" (Charmaz 2006; Glaser 2001). In line with a grounded theory approach, hypothetical frameworks were not imposed on the data but rather the analysis attempted to remain as close to the actual data as possible. However, in order to create some coherence and clarity in the emergent findings and to link the results from this study to those from the current dominant model in educational psychology, the literature concerning the Internal/External (I/E) model (Marsh 1986) was consulted. Nevertheless, the researcher consciously worked at remaining open to alternative ideas and interpretations in case they emerged. As such, care was taken not to insist on the theoretical internal/external distinction or the model from which it originated. Instead efforts were made to keep the analysis firmly grounded in the specifics of the actual data.

Results

The analysis of the data revealed a number of highly-interrelated factors, which were separated into two broad categories, either internal or external factors. Internal factors were defined as being any factors which are centred primarily within an individual such as beliefs, other self-concepts, affective and cognitive reactions. External factors were defined as those factors which stem largely from outside an individual such as actual experiences, experiences with significant individuals, one's learning environment, feedback from others etc. (Mercer 2011). Ultimately, it may not be possible to sustain the internal/external distinction (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2002), as they may not be truly independent categories and the distinction between the two may be more a matter of degree, i.e., the extent to which they are relatively internal or relatively external. However, it was felt that this distinction would serve to make these extremely complex data more comprehensible and provide an intelligible overview of the factors emerging

from the analysis and would link the findings to those of other studies investigating the I/E model (Marsh 1986).

When considering the findings, it is also important to note the highly inter-connected and complex nature of the factors described. As such, the factors described in this paper are not intended to be considered in isolation as discrete items, but rather as contributing factors within an intricate series of psychological processes and contextual influences in which several factors may combine and function simultaneously in complex ways. The list is not intended to be viewed as exhaustive and the potential for additional factors to emerge with different populations in different settings should also be kept in mind.

In order to illustrate points made in the analysis, and given limitations of space, only one extract is usually provided from the data.[2] Each of these has been selected based on its suitability for illustrating the point concisely. If there was a noticeably large number of supporting examples in the data, or equally, very few, this is stated explicitly.

Internal frames of reference affecting the EFL self-concept

Internal cross-domain comparisons

As could be expected from the 'internal' frame of reference in the I/E model (Marsh 1986), the first internal factor which emerged from the data analysed in this study concerns internal comparisons made by learners within their self-concept networks across domains, comparing their own perceived ability in one school subject to another subject. Firstly, these learners seemed to compare their maths and languages self-concepts and used each as a frame of reference for the other:

> I was much more the language type than the maths type at school, rather this playing with words than scientific facts that I like. (I#1: 636–638)

Indeed, throughout the data and as expected from the literature, many learners appeared to dichotomise maths and languages viewing themselves as either a 'languages person' or a 'maths person' and grouping together subjects which they perceived as similar, such as in this data extract sciences and maths.

The second and most salient[3] instance of cross-domain comparisons in these data is across learners' foreign language self-concepts, if they had experience of studying more than one language:

> I know that, I know that I'm ahead in English and I'm behind in Italian. (J#4: 1174–1175)

Learners were often seen to judge their ability in one foreign language by comparing it to their perceived ability in another. Interestingly, at this level, the learners very rarely compared their current EFL self-concept to their mother tongue (L1) self-concept. Thus, in the domain of foreign language learning, it seems as if learners' self-concepts in other foreign languages act as important frames of reference when forming their EFL self-concept.

Another internal cross-domain comparison made by these learners was across the skills of writing and speaking within the EFL domain, which would seem to be the logical extension of the internal comparison across subject-level domains. In these data, for example, learners often appear to place the skill domains of writing and speaking in a dichotomy:

> I really saw that my writing was not that good, but my speaking, the way I spoke was better than the writing skills. (I#4: 224–226)

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2   Referencing conventions for data extracts: 'J' is used to refer to the single case study data; 'N' refers to the written narrative data; 'A' refers to the autobiographies; and 'I' refers to the interview data. The first number (e.g., #1) refers to the number of the primary document from which the extract is taken. The following numbers (e.g., 636–638) are the line numbers of the data extract.

3   In this paper, I take 'salient' to mean that it occurred as a frequent code instance throughout the case study data and appeared frequently across a number of data extracts in each of the other data sets.

This finding appears to extend the fundamental premise of the I/E model to a higher degree of domain-specificity. However, this level of cross-skill comparison may be more relevant for advanced learners, as it is possible that as learners gain in proficiency, they are able to distinguish between their skills within a language domain to a higher degree.

Belief systems

Another internal frame of reference that appears to be used by learners in these data in forming their EFL self-concepts is their belief systems. The main set of beliefs concern learners' general beliefs about language learning. As would be expected from the literature (see, e.g., Kalaja & Barcelos 2003; Mori 1999), the data shows that all the learners express clearly held beliefs about language learning as a process, and the data contain a great number of examples in which such beliefs appear to act as a frame of reference for the learners' specific foreign language self-concepts. It is worth noting that the beliefs tend to be more holistic concerning language learning generally, and not just about learning a particular language:

> A good language learner should be open-minded and talkative too. I am of the opinion that I can fulfil all these aspects (N#61: 24–26)

A particular belief that is worth mentioning separately is that grammar and, in particular, vocabulary should be learnt by heart. It seems as if some learners feel that they 'ought' to do this, and the fact that they do not leads them to describe themselves as 'lazy' as far as this is concerned, e.g.:

> Obviously, I am a little bit lazy with studying grammar and vocabulary but nevertheless I know these are necessary things to do. (N#29: 34–36)

The potentially negative effect on a learner's self-concept if they do not do what they feel they 'ought' to do is evident, although clearly, possessing such beliefs need not necessarily have a negative impact. The effect of 'ought' beliefs on motivation via an individual's self-concept is the focus of much current research in SLA (Dörnyei 2005, 2009), and the data here highlight the importance of learners' belief systems in processes of self-concept formation.

Affective factors

In these data, learners also referred extensively to affective factors such as interest, fun and enjoyment as being important, but mostly these associations appeared in connection with motivation rather than self-concept directly. Given the reported link between motivation and self-beliefs (see, e.g., Covington 1992; Wigfield & Karpathian 1991), it is possible that such affective factors could be connected with the learners' self-concepts indirectly via their motivation.

One particular affective state that seems to be important for many learners' self-concepts in these data is a 'feeling of progress' in a particular language:

> I can actually see that there is something, that there is now, that I am progressing a lot quicker right now. I can see it myself, you know. I can virtually see that my understanding, it comes into, it's more, I don't know, I'm getting a feeling for the language. (J#21: 67–71)

Several learners indicated that they need to feel a sense of progress, a feeling that they are improving in the language, in order to be able to develop a positive self-concept in the domain.

External frame of reference affecting the EFL self-concept

Social comparison

In Marsh's (1986) I/E model, one of the key factors within the external frame of reference is social comparison with others. This is when students compare their perceived performances and grades with those of others, usually their peers in the same class or school. This frame of reference also occurred frequently across all of these data:

> There are two guys in our cou,rse, they are sitting behind us, behind Alice and me, and I just feel so stupid every time they are around and I just might not remember, they always know everything. (J#6: 681–684)

However, it is worth noting that the learners' comparison with others is not just restricted to peers in the immediately-relevant domains of language learning, but to other individuals within other domains perceived as relevant by the individual including most notably family members, but of particular interest for the domain of language learning, also to native speakers:

> I notice how my English is when I talk to native speakers. For example, when I was in Italy there was an American girl, she lived at my… she spent a week at my place and she was just chatting all the time and I had problems talking with her because, ok she talked really fast... she had these really specific words I didn't even know existed and then I noticed, oh, I got a long way to go. That affects my motivation. (I#3: 439–446)

Some of these social comparisons may take place unconsciously and may in part be 'enforced' by procedures in certain educational cultures such as competitive systems and the use of certain language models and norms; however, they may also be initiated and directed by learners themselves in order to serve differing self-related functions such as self-assessment, self-protection or self-enhancement. As such, social comparisons are likely to affect an individual's self-concept albeit in complex ways which may be difficult to predict.

Significant Others

Many of the learners in the data referred to significant individuals who they perceived as having been influential for their self-concepts. The individuals cited included family members, boyfriends/girlfriends, penfriends, peers and, as might be expected for this academic domain (Pekrun 1990), most importantly, teachers. However, on closer examination of the data, it seems not to be the teacher per se who is influential for the learners' self-concepts, but rather it appears to be their methods, feedback and the learning experiences that they facilitate, as well as the classroom climate they engender (see, e.g., Cole, Maxwell & Martin 1997; Weinstein 2002), possibly in affective terms (Ryan, Stiller & Lynch 1994), e.g.:

> I think English was always my favourite or has always been my favourite language. And I had two great English teachers and I really, really loved them and they had a special way of teaching and they had a special way of motivating their pupils and we did a lot of theatre plays in the gymnasium[4] and things like that so we had a lot of interaction in the actual classes, so I had a totally different attitude towards English classes than towards Italian classes. (J#1: 40–48)

A potential caveat that should be noted is that the potential effect of any feedback, directly and indirectly, from significant others appears to depend on the learner's attitude towards that person:

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4   Gymnasium = Grammar school.

> X …my aunt and my cousins said, well, I'm talking perfect.

> S Yeah.

> X But they are not used to foreigners talking English so well, but still I'm looking for words and I know that the accent is not right, so it isn't good enough for me. (I#1: 416–423)

It seems that, in order to have any impact on an individual's self-concept, the person offering an opinion or feedback, also possibly in the form of grades, has to be perceived as being a credible, respected and believable source of feedback for the particular domain in that particular context.

Experiences of success/failure

Another external factor that seems to be influential for EFL learners' self-concepts is their experiences of success or failure. Whilst this also includes standardised test scores and grades, as envisaged by Marsh's (1986) external frame of reference, it is also more broadly defined in this study, in order to incorporate learners' own subjective perceptions of success or failure in language learning and also in language use contexts, which may take place in formal or informal settings:

> My listening comprehension is good. When I was in England for 3 months I understood what other people told me with hardly any problems. And I also could tell them what I wanted to say. I think my spoken English is really good. (N#32: 17–20)

It is important to note that what is recognised as success or failure appears to depend on an individual's own perceptions of an experience and cannot solely be evaluated based on standardised external measurements of success or failure. For example, the case study student receives a '4+' in a written English test. Whilst this is a solid pass and clearly not a failure within the contexts of the established assessment framework,[5] Joana interprets the grade personally as a 'failure':

> Because I had, okay, for me it is a really bad grade to have a four plus and it is a really, for me that is really bad, it's almost like five, or I mean even if it is a four plus, it's not a three right or it's, it's nothing. (J#6: 961–964)

Interestingly, learners' subjectivity in the interpretation of grades is a dimension which research on the I/E model to date has largely overlooked, given its focus on external standardised forms of feedback and test scores and use of fixed-item research tools.

Despite the supposed importance of standardised experiences of success or failure documented elsewhere, there were relatively few instances of this in these data. More important for the majority of learners in these data were perceived successes and failures, in particular in informal language use contexts:

> In February I have been to New York which has also encouraged me to study harder. I found out how poor my English really is. In the first time I could hardly understand native speakers at all. (A#21: 33–35)

It is likely that the influence of these informal experiences is especially notable in respect to foreign language learning, which, particularly at this advanced level, often provides more opportunities for using language in contexts beyond the bounds of formalised learning environments compared to other subjects.

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5 In Austria, grades are awarded 1 to 5. 5 is a fail, 1 is equivalent to an 'A'.

Finally, it is also necessary to consider the attributions that learners make for their various successes and failures and how these may mediate the effect of an experience or a grade on the learner's self-concept:

> …exams results can affect my idea about me… if I've really worked hard but of course exam results also depends on how much effort you put in… it's not the mark itself but the mark in relation to the effort. (I#1: 696–700)

As suggested elsewhere (Williams et al. 2004), learners may make differing attributions for their successes and failures, and these may be driven by various psychologically motivated processes, e.g., self-serving bias, self-enhancement, self-verification and self-protection, and as such, care must be taken not to automatically assume a straightforward relationship between a person's test scores and the anticipated effect on their self-concept. Instead, there seem to be more complex processes at work, whereby external factors are mediated by various internal processes and motives.

Language learning/use contexts & experiences

Learners' EFL self-concepts also appear to be affected by their experiences in and feelings towards various language learning or language use environments, as one would possibly expect given the acknowledged effect of the environment on self-concept (see, e.g., Markus & Wurf 1987; Trautwein et al. 2006). In the data examined, there was evidence of the influence of language learning contexts in both the present and retrospective past sense. In particular, learners highlighted experiences in school, as well as teachers' teaching styles and the learning environment created by teachers, as the data extract below illustrates:

> In the past I've always had nice and very good English teachers. I think it really matters a lot what kind of teacher you have. It influences your whole point of view. A good teacher makes you feel comfortable and you will not be afraid of asking questions. Further he/she can really motivate you. I think I have always been quite good in English because I really came along with my teachers and that's why I never was afraid or worried about speaking out or asking questions. (N#34: 29–36)

Notably, many learners also referred to specific informal situations in which they had used the language and which they perceived as having been significant for their self-concept development:

> However, there was a special occasion when I recognized that my English wasn't that good I wanted it to be: In summer 2003, some of my relatives from Canada spent a few weeks in Austria and asked me to operate as a "translator" during their stay. Then I found out that my active knowledge of the language and my knowledge of English-speaking countries in general (apart from geographical facts and actual political things and all that stuff spread around the world by media) was awfully bad. (N#24: 10–16)

The saliency in the data of experiences in such informal language use settings highlights the importance for research into language learners' self-concepts of taking a holistic view of the learner and not just isolating them within a language classroom or formalised learning contexts.

Discussion

Internal frames of reference

In terms of the internal cross-domain comparisons that learners engage in, the data suggest the importance of learners' other foreign language self-concepts as learners often appear to compare their perceived abilities in one foreign language to those in the other. In this way, it is possible that the same processes, as suggested by research into the possible effects of the I/E model (Marsh, Kong & Hau 2001), in which the cross-domain comparison can strengthen one self-concept and weaken the other, despite

potentially similar actual abilities, are at work between different foreign languages. Interestingly, learners at this advanced level did not perceive EFL as a single unified entity, but rather differentiated between various skill domains, in particular between their written and spoken skills and thus, compared their abilities across these skills. Whilst it seems as if this cross-skill comparison may contribute to their overall EFL self-concept, it could also potentially accentuate their respective writing and speaking self-beliefs, in the manner suggested above. A final consideration about the internal cross-domain comparisons concerns the ways in which learners may consider subjects to be similar or different. An individual's perception of similarities and differences between domains could influence the types and effects of cross-domain comparisons they engage in (Möller et al. 2006; Rost et al. 2005).

One of the most salient factors in the data was the use of learners' beliefs about the nature of foreign language learning as an internal frame of reference. As learners' beliefs often reflect their local educational cultures, it would be useful to understand how different foreign language learning cultures may conceptualise, think and talk about the process of language learning, in order to appreciate how learners across contexts and in respect to different foreign languages may use differing sets of domain-specific beliefs when forming and evaluating their foreign language self-concepts.

The data also appear to indicate the importance of positive affect for learners in developing a positive self-concept in a domain (cf. Denissen, Zarrett & Eccles 2007; Goetz et al. 2008), although further research is needed to clarify the exact nature of such a relationship. From these data, it seems especially important for learners to feel a sense of progress in respect to their language learning skills development.

External frames of reference

Considering social comparisons, it is possible that the perceived relationship to the person who a learner compares themselves with and their evaluation of them is also important. Specifically within the foreign language domain, there is a need to more fully understand the effects on learners' self-concept, when comparing themselves with other learners/users of the language and, in particular, with native-speakers. An additional dimension to this which it is also important to understand is whether the comparison is voluntarily self-directed or imposed by contextual parameters.

It was also proposed that language learning may be an academic subject domain that is special due to the large number of opportunities it offers for informal experiences with the language. Learners' self-concepts often appear to be influenced by their experiences in a range of language learning or language use settings, most notably in affective terms. As such, research in the foreign language domain in particular will need to consider frames of reference from both inside and outside the classroom, which could affect learners' self-concept. In terms of experiences in both types of setting, it was shown how a learner's own subjective perceptions of success and failure may impact on their self-concept, rather than just, if at all, the standardised measure of success/failure in that context.

Conclusions

There are three considerations that should be kept in mind regarding the findings in this article which suggest that care must be taken not to create an oversimplistic model of the processes and interrelationships of factors at work in self-concept development. Firstly, the analyses reveal the highly interrelated nature of the factors surrounding self-concept development, in particular the apparent close connection with motivation and affect, which were widely spread throughout the data. Secondly, given the potentially strong overlap between internal and external factors, it is questionable whether such a distinction can, in fact, be made at all. It is possible that the effects of some external factors may be mediated by internal factors such as attributions, or may be processed via other internal psychological processes such as self-verification, self-enhancement, self-serving bias, self-assessment etc. Thus, the external factors themselves may not affect

the self-concept directly, but rather it may be the way they are processed internally, often in affective terms, that is of importance in self-concept formation (Skaalvik & Skaalvik 2002). Thirdly, further research is needed to explore in more detail to what extent these findings may vary across individuals and contexts. For example, Marsh, Kong & Hau (2001) have cautioned that the internal/external processes may be weighted differently and of differing relative magnitude for individuals in forming their self-concepts and hence, some learners may vary in the degree to which they place more of an emphasis on internal or external factors. It is also possible that some factors may play a greater role in specific contexts and at certain points in a learner's development leading to potential contextual variation (Mercer 2011). It also needs to be clarified how the various factors, internal and external, combine, interact and potentially mediate each other in self-concept formation processes.

To conclude, the same frames of reference that are included in the I/E model (Marsh 1986), namely internal cross-domain comparisons and external social comparisons and standardised feedback, also play a role in the EFL context. However, these data reveal additional factors that need to be considered such as learners' belief systems, affective responses, relationships with significant others, a wide range of social comparisons, subjective views of success and failure, and, importantly, informal contexts and experiences.

Although many questions remain about self-concept formation in respect to the domain of language learning, this article has illustrated the exciting potential of this area. Given the central role attributed to self-concept in successful learning and potentially even greater significance of the construct in respect to language learning, there is an urgent need for a more extensive programme of research to better understand the nature of this construct in the unique foreign language learning domain. Considering the complex interplay of external and internal factors in self-concept formation processes, the findings caution against assuming that simplistic pedagogical interventions can affect learners' self-concepts in easily predictable ways. However, they do suggest the benefits of educators working towards developing a positive and non-threatening environment, in which learners are able to have credible experiences of success and to ideally work in non-competitive classrooms, thus reducing the need for social comparisons. Above all, this study shows that, in order to fully understand the self-concepts of our learners, we need to view them holistically as complex individuals whose lives and experiences stretch beyond the boundaries in time and place of our current classrooms.

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