

Self-Esteem in the foreign language classroom and learning: theory, evidence, and teaching implications

Abstract: This article examines the implications of self-esteem within the educational sphere and, more specifically, in the context of foreign language learning. Drawing from two foundational studies (Cano-Jiménez & Rubio-Alcalá, 2022; Rubio-Alcalá & Cano-Jiménez, 2024), it explores the structure and interaction of three dimensions: language competence, skills performance, and perceived social support of the self-esteem in the foreign language classroom. SEFLS (Self-esteem in the Foreign Language Classroom Scale) is administered to a large sample of foreign language learners and provides quantitative statistical analyses. Findings demonstrate significant self-esteem in the domain-specific, and achievement in language learning. The article concludes by offering pedagogical recommendations and proposing new avenues for future inquiry.

Keywords: Self-esteem, foreign language classroom, language learning, theoretical framework, teaching implications

Introduction

Self-esteem emerges as a crucial factor influencing motivation, persistence, and performance in the classroom. Therefore, self-esteem has been acknowledged as a critical affective factor in educational psychology and second language acquisition (SLA) (Arnold, 1999; Dörnyei, 2005). Despite growing interest in affective variables such as motivation and anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Horwitz, 1986), domain-specific research on self-esteem within foreign language learning contexts has been underdeveloped (Mercer, 2011; Guban-Caisido, 2020). In response to this gap, Cano-Jiménez and Rubio-Alcalá (2022, 2024) propose a specialized theoretical and psychometric model of self-concept and self-esteem within the Foreign Language Classroom (FLC), supported by robust theoretical frameworks and empirical validation through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Their model identifies three interrelated dimensions: language competence, skills performance, and perceived social support. These categories, rather than existing as isolated components, interact to construct an educational framework that illuminates the ways in which learners' confidence in acquiring and using a foreign language is fostered, sustained, or hindered through instructional practices and within diverse educational settings.

Along these lines, the present paper extends that work by analysing self-esteem theoretically in the context of education, and specifically in the foreign language classroom and learning. An empirical quantitative study of the construct in this specific domain through application of the SEFLS is presented. In doing so, it aims to provide researchers and educators with a rigorous, valid, and reliable framework for understanding and measuring self-esteem in FLC contexts and contribute to both theoretical understanding and pedagogical practice.

Theoretical framework

Self-concept and self-esteem, though often conflated, represent distinct yet interrelated constructs within cognitive-affective development. While self-concept refers to the perceived structure of personal identity, self-esteem denotes the evaluative dimension of one's worth or value (Rosenberg, 1965), or more specifically, the evaluative outcome of self-concept. This distinction is particularly relevant within the broader educational context, where self-esteem plays a decisive role in shaping students' academic trajectories. Thus, high self-esteem has been consistently associated with stronger motivation, greater resilience in the face of setbacks, and improved social interactions, while in contrast, low self-esteem tends to diminish learners' willingness to take risks, undermining concentration and performance (Orth & Robins, 2019). In this sense, early scholars assumed a one-way influence from self-esteem to achievement, while contemporary research highlights a reciprocal relationship: academic success

enhances self-esteem, which in turn promotes greater engagement, forming a positive feedback loop (Baumeister et al., 2003; Marsh & Craven, 2006). So that evolving perspective underscores the need for pedagogical approaches that ensure learners experience sustained success, thereby strengthening both their competence and self-worth.

According to Gardner (2010), the significance of self-esteem becomes particularly pronounced in foreign language learning, a domain characterized by communication, identity negotiation, and exposure to evaluative settings. In this domain-specific, learners' self-perceptions, whether internal, such as perceived linguistic competence, or external, such as the value attributed to the target culture, profoundly influence their affective attitudes toward language learning. For this reason, fostering environments that strengthen learners' sense of self is essential, and classroom practices must address in that direction by encourage collaboration, personalization, and meaningful interaction to promote confidence and positive affect in learners.

A further layer in understanding self-esteem within education lies in recognizing its graduated nature. While global self-esteem provides a broad sense of personal worth, domain-specific forms such as academic or linguistic self-esteem fluctuate more dynamically, reflecting situational challenges and contextual influences (Orth & Robins, 2019). This differentiation is relevant, as it allows for the identification of specific areas in which learners may require targeted support. In terms of language education, these fluctuations can significantly shape learners' willingness to communicate, their persistence in language practice, and their capacity to integrate feedback in a constructive way.

Upon on these considerations, it becomes clear that general conceptualizations of self-esteem, though valuable, are insufficient for capturing the specific ways in which it operates in foreign language classrooms. To overcome this drawback, Cano-Jiménez and Rubio-Alcalá (2022) and Rubio-Alcalá and Cano-Jiménez (2024) developed a theoretical and psychometric model of self-concept and self-esteem specifically tailored to the Foreign Language Classroom (FLC), validated through Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA). Their model proposes a comprehensive framework for understanding how learners' confidence is shaped, sustained, or hindered through instructional practices and diverse educational settings. The model not only advances theoretical clarity but also provides a practical lens for designing pedagogical interventions that nurture learners' self-esteem in the specific context of language classroom and learning.

Based on their model, it is composed by the three interdimensional correlations as it presents:

Language competence encompasses the dispositional traits that enable learners to achieve academic success. This dimension includes students' self-perceptions of their own abilities and their level of the specific evaluation of the self-efficacy, reflecting beliefs about their capacity to perform and succeed based on perceived intellectual or academic skills or tasks performance. Beyond general academic self-efficacy, in the context of language learning, language aptitude, proficiency, and self-confidence are particularly relevant. Fundamentally, learners may possess the technical skills required for complex tasks, but if their self-perception of competence is low, their engagement and performance are likely to be limited.

Skills performance refers to learners' evaluations of their ability to carry out specific language tasks, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Successfully completing tasks reinforces learners' sense of efficacy and confidence, creating positive feedback for further engagement. Contrarily, tasks that exceed learners' current level or are poorly scaffolded can induce frustration and a sense of incompetence, highlighting the importance of carefully designed learning experiences (Rubio-Alcalá & Cano-Jiménez, 2024).

Perceived social support pertains to learners' perceptions of their interactions with peers and teachers, encompassing both the sense of belonging in the classroom community and the quality of feedback received. In foreign language classrooms, where oral participation and continual exposure to evaluative situations are central, learners frequently navigate interpersonal dynamics that are less common in other subjects. Hence, educators can foster a positive social environment in order to enhance learners' self-esteem and their willingness to participate in communicative activities.

Overall, these three dimensions demonstrate that self-esteem in language learning is a central, structuring element of the educational experience. In this sense, Krashen (1982) notes in his affective filter hypothesis that anxiety, low motivation, and lack of confidence raise the "filter" that prevents linguistic input from being processed in an effective way. Therefore, the interplay of language competence, skills performance, and perceived social support shapes learners' confidence, motivation,

and engagement, highlighting the inseparability of cognitive, affective, and social factors in the acquisition of a foreign language.

In summary, self-concept and self-esteem are central constructs for understanding students' cognitive, affective, and motivational paths. The proposed three-dimensional model therefore offers a robust framework that highlights the interdependence of cognitive, behavioural, and social dimensions, while providing practical strategies for fostering resilient, autonomous, and self-confident language learners. Future research should continue to explore how these dimensions interact in diverse contexts and populations, refining the understanding of the complex role of self-esteem in shaping both academic achievement and personal development.

Methodology

The study used a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design incorporating psychometric validation procedures. A three-dimensions scale was developed and adapted from established self-esteem instruments, theory and contextualized specifically for the foreign language classroom. The research included exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses (EFA and CFA) to assess the construct validity of the scale and ensure its suitability for measuring self-esteem in language learning specific contexts. The scale was administered to participants through the emails and social networks and processed by Qualtrics software to manage the responses.

Participants. A suitable sample of 252 adult foreign language learners participated in the study. They were aged between 18 and over 40 years, with a mean age of 25 years old, and from diverse educational settings including official language schools, universities, and other language institutions. The gender distribution was 76.6% female and 23.4% male. Regarding the languages studied, the majority were learning English (68.7%) and French (20.6%), with the remainder studying Portuguese, Italian, German, Japanese, or Russian (<5% each).

Instrument. The Self-Esteem in Foreign Language Classroom Scale (SEFLS) is based on a neurogenerative conception of self-concept and self-esteem, in which self-esteem emerges from evaluations of domain-specific self-concept dimensions (Rubio-Alcalá, 2014). The SEFLS consists of 10 items measured on a 10-point Likert scale (0 = totally disagree, 10 = totally agree), designed to assess self-esteem specifically in foreign language learning contexts. The scale evaluates three interrelated dimensions: language competence (6 items), reflecting learners' perceptions of their academic and linguistic abilities; skills performance (2 items), capturing learners' self-assessment of specific language skills such as speaking and communicate skills self-perceptions; and, perceived social support (2 items), assessing the sense of belonging and quality of interactions with peers. Total SEFLS scores range from 0 to 100 points, and it's based on five cut-off points established as: 0–20% = very low self-esteem; 21–40% = low self-esteem; 41–60% = moderate self-esteem; 61–80% = high self-esteem; and 81–100% = very high self-esteem.

Data analysis included descriptive statistics, reliability estimates using the Omega coefficient, and confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) to validate the factorial structure of the scale. Accordingly, to Cano-Jiménez & Rubio-Alcalá (2022), the model fit was evaluated with standard indices including CFI, NNFI, TLI, SRMR, RMSEA, and GFI. Moreover, the exploratory analyses examined the correlations between total SEFLS score, the language studied, and the type of educational institution, providing insight into contextual influences on learners' self-esteem.

Results

Psychometric evaluation of the 10-item Self-Esteem in Foreign Language Environments Scale (SEFLS) demonstrated high reliability and validity, supporting its use in foreign language classroom contexts. Thus, model fit and reliability using Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) confirm the three-dimensional structure of the SEFLS, encompassing language proficiency, skill performance, and perceived social support. The model fit indices were excellent: CFI = .98, NNFI = .97, TLI = .97, SRMR = .02, RMSEA = .06, and GFI = .95, exceeding all conventional acceptability thresholds (Boateng et al., 2018). Internal consistency was similarly high ($\omega = .92$), indicating that the scale reliably measures self-esteem across these three domains. The analysis of the total SEFLS scores revealed a normal distribution centred at 75 points, corresponding to the high self-esteem range (61–80) established by the scale's

cutoff thresholds. This indicates that most students report moderate to high self-esteem in foreign language contexts, suggesting a generally positive self-perception in the sample.

Regarding dimensional loadings, the analysis of the specific items for each dimension confirmed the relevance of all three components, with linguistic competence representing the strongest dimension, with six items reflecting students' self-efficacy and perceived competence. This underscores the centrality of perceived language ability in shaping self-esteem in the foreign language classroom. The Skills Performance test comprised two items focused on students' perceptions of their task-specific abilities, particularly oral production and pronunciation, emphasizing the role of active use of skills in bolstering self-confidence. Perceived Social Support includes two items that capture students' sense of belonging and the acceptance they receive from peers, highlighting the importance of social dynamics in the development of self-esteem. Cross-tabulation between language studied and type of educational institution revealed notable trends. English was the most studied language across all educational contexts, while French and Portuguese were predominantly concentrated in formal language schools. These patterns suggest that both the language itself and the institutional environment can influence students' experiences of self-esteem, although more research is needed to quantify these effects.

Overall, the results demonstrate that the SEFLS is a psychometrically robust instrument for assessing self-esteem in foreign language contexts. The scale's high reliability, excellent fit to the model, and clear dimensional structure support its usefulness for both research and pedagogical applications. The distribution of scores indicates that most students experience moderate to high self-esteem, and the distinct contributions of language proficiency, skill performance, and perceived social support highlight the multifaceted nature of self-esteem in the foreign language classroom.

Educational implications and pedagogical recommendations

The findings of this study have significant implications for language teaching, highlighting the central role of self-esteem in learners' academic and socio-emotional development. Educators are not only responsible for transmitting language knowledge but also for fostering an environment that fosters students' confidence, motivation, and resilience. As García & Cabezas (1998) note, research underscores that sustained experiences of success in academic tasks enhance students' self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, while socio-emotional learning frameworks further support the development of self-awareness, self-regulation, and overall self-esteem.

Therefore, integrating self-esteem-building activities into foreign language curricula can enhance student engagement and perseverance. Tasks should be structured to offer gradual and meaningful challenges, allowing students to experience progressive achievements that reinforce perceptions of competence and self-efficacy. Oral activities, in particular, should be framed as opportunities for creative exploration rather than high-stakes assessments, normalizing error as a natural part of the learning process.

In doing so, educators play a pivotal role in shaping classroom climates conducive to high self-esteem. Teacher training programs should emphasize recognition of learners' strengths, empathetic interactions, and strategies to foster positive affective experiences (Oxford, 2016). Instructors should be aware of the potential impact of expectations on learner performance and take measures to avoid self-fulfilling prophecies, known as the Pygmalion effect (Navarro, 2009).

Several practical strategies can be employed to enhance self-esteem in foreign language learners:

- **Promoting Success-Oriented Experiences:** Structured tasks that ensure achievable progress help reinforce self-efficacy and confidence.

- **Encouraging Collaborative Learning:** Cooperative activities reduce competitive anxiety, foster a sense of belonging, and strengthen peer support networks. Classroom climate in which learners feel valued and accepted encourages active participation and the development of communicative competence.

- **Recognizing Individual Differences:** Instruction should be tailored to learners' personalities, learning styles, and linguistic backgrounds to promote inclusion and engagement.

- **Addressing Negative Beliefs:** Cognitive reframing techniques and reflective practices can mitigate harmful self-perceptions and improve affective resilience.

• **Integrating Self-Assessment Tools:** Scales such as the SEFLS enable learners to monitor their progress, fostering self-awareness and empowering them to take ownership of their learning journey.

In sum, the role of the teacher is to facilitate contexts in which self-esteem can flourish, oral communication is experienced as an opportunity rather than a test, and learners recognize themselves as legitimate speakers of another language. By intentionally integrating the strategies outlined above, educators can enhance learners' self-esteem, ultimately supporting higher levels of linguistic performance, motivation, and socio-emotional development.

Discussion

The three-dimensions structure comprising language competence, skills performance, and perceived social support aligns closely with theoretical frameworks proposed by Mercer (2011), Rubio-Alcalá (2014), and Dörnyei (2005), which emphasize the interplay of cognitive, affective, and social dimensions in language learning. Importantly, the SEFLS distinguishes between task-specific self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and global self-worth (Rosenberg, 1965), adapting these constructs to the particular challenges and contexts of language acquisition.

Among the three dimensions, language competence emerged as the strongest predictor of overall self-esteem. This finding is consistent with prior research linking learners' linguistic self-efficacy to academic achievement and engagement (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Cedzich, 2024). The prominence of language competence highlights the centrality of learners' perceived ability to successfully navigate linguistic tasks in shaping overall self-esteem. Skills performance, particularly in speaking and pronunciation, demonstrated moderate correlations with self-esteem, reflecting the affective weight of oral communication and task-specific success in FLCs (Al-Ariqi & Sharyan, 2022; Koosha et al., 2011). Meanwhile, perceived social support played a critical socio-affective role, reinforcing prior findings that peers relationships buffer anxiety and promote confidence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reasoner, 1983).

Exploratory analyses revealed patterns suggesting that institutional context may influence language-specific self-esteem. Learners enrolled in language schools studying less commonly taught languages, such as Portuguese or Japanese, reported slightly lower SEFLS total scores compared to university students learning English. These differences may reflect variations in pedagogical support, peer interaction, or opportunities for communicative practice, indicating that institutional environments can shape the development of self-esteem in language learning contexts.

The psychometric robustness of the SEFLS, demonstrated by excellent model fit indices and high internal consistency ($\omega = .92$), confirms its suitability as a domain-specific measure of self-esteem in FLCs. Practically, the scale can inform targeted interventions to enhance learners' self-esteem, such as structuring mastery experiences (Bandura, 1997), promoting collaborative learning, and strengthening social support networks (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). These applications align with broader educational objectives, emphasizing not only linguistic competence but also the socio-emotional development and well-being of learners.

Nonetheless, some limitations should be acknowledged. The study focused exclusively on adult learners and validated the scale in Spanish-speaking contexts, which may constrain generalizability. Future research should investigate adaptations of the SEFLS for younger learners, linguistically diverse populations, and other cultural contexts. Longitudinal studies could better clarify how the three dimensions of self-esteem interact over time and in different learning environments.

In summary, the SEFLS offers a validated, practical, and theoretically grounded tool for assessing and supporting self-esteem in students with language difficulties. Its multidimensional approach underscores the importance of integrating cognitive, performance, and social factors into language pedagogy, highlighting avenues for improving both students' language outcomes and their broader socioemotional development.

Conclusion

Self-esteem plays a central role in the academic field, in this domain-specific is remarkably that it is influencing motivation, autonomy, creativity, and the ability to overcome challenges. While there is still ongoing debate about whether self-esteem is a cause or consequence of academic performance

during decades back, current research indicates a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between the two of them. In this line, education should not focus exclusively on cognitive instruction but also prioritize the development of learners' emotional and affective resources for an appropriate environment to learning process.

In terms of the Self-Esteem in Foreign Language Classroom Scale (SEFLS), the validation and framework provide a reliable and theoretically grounded instrument for assessing self-esteem in language learners. Its multidimensional structure, encompassing language competence, skill performance, and perceived social support which captures the complex role and interplay between linguistic identity and self-proficient, affective factors, and social context. This framework not only advances research in second language acquisition but also offers practical applications for enhancing students' affective experiences in the classroom.

In today's educational environments with increasingly competitive and constantly changing, fostering positive self-esteem contributes to improved academic performance and the development of resilient and confident individuals capable of addressing contemporary social challenges. Thus, positive self-beliefs foster motivation, risk-taking, perseverance, and broader socio-emotional growth, highlighting the need to integrate self-esteem development as a core component of language pedagogy, rather than a secondary goal.

In address to future inquiry, it should explore longitudinal routes of self-esteem in language learning and examine, in the same line, how digital and intercultural learning environments influence students' self-concept. By addressing so in both the cognitive and affective dimensions of learning, educators can promote holistic development of their process, ensuring that learners are not only linguistically competent but also confident and engaged participants in their educational journey.

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