Learners' Self-esteem and Its Relationships with Motivation for Learning English, Self-perceived and Actual English Proficiency

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1　Introduction

Affective factors which may have impacts on foreign language learning have been researched since around the late 1980's. These factors include motivation, anxiety, attitudes, tolerance of ambiguity, risk-taking tendencies, and so forth, and studies dealing with them have achieved certain degrees of results in the field of teaching English as a second/foreign language (ESL/EFL).

Self-esteem is also considered to be among these affective factors. A book edited by Rubio (2007) gives an in-depth but rather theoretical account of the topic of self-esteem in the ESL/EFL classroom. In this book, self-esteem refers to "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." According to Arnold and Brown (1999), self-esteem is described on three progressively specific levels: global or general self-esteem (the way people generally feel about themselves), situational self-esteem (one's appraisals of oneself in specific situations), and task self-esteem (having to do with particular tasks in a specific situation). Among these, 'global self-esteem' was found to predict people's emotional reactions to task performance (Dutton and Brown 1997).

Self-esteem has been researched considerably in the field of educational psychology, and the focus has been on the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement. Self-esteem is said to be positively related to second/foreign language proficiency. According to Rubio (2007), students with low self-esteem may avoid taking the necessary risks to acquire communicative competence in the target language, and they may feel deeply insecure and even drop out of the class. In spite of the possible positive relationship between self-esteem and language proficiency, research investigating this relationship or dealing with this affective factor, in relation to other affective factors, is relatively scarce in the field.

One such research is Hassan's (2001), which examined self-esteem in an EFL learning context. He investigated its associations with writing apprehension and found that the self-esteem of EFL university students was negatively correlated with writing

anxiety. Also, Tadokoro (2002) found that students' global self-esteem affected their comfort with communicating in English in the ESL classroom in the United States. She concluded that in order for the subjects to feel comfortable using English, positive evaluation of their English ability, as well as positive self-acceptance, were important. Tadokoro's study suggests a link between self-esteem and evaluation of learners' second language ability.

If self-esteem is positively associated with self-perception of English proficiency, it may also be positively related to learners' strength of motivation for learning English, and perhaps it favorably affects learners' actual English proficiency, as well as perceived proficiency. More recently, Soureshjani and Naseri (2011) investigated the relationship between self-esteem and proficiency level in the EFL classroom in Iran. They found a strong positive relationship. We will investigate if this is also the case with Japanese EFL learners.

The present study investigates self-esteem among EFL learners in Japan. As variables which may be associated with self-esteem, strength of motivation for learning English, self-perception of English ability, and actual English proficiency, will be investigated.

2　Research Questions

The research questions of the present study are 1) Is self-esteem positively related to strength of motivation?, 2) Is self-esteem positively related to self-perceived English ability?, and 3) Is self-esteem positively related to actual English proficiency?

3　Methodology

3.1　Subjects

The subjects were 144 Japanese students enrolled in an English course, 'English I' at a private university in Niigata, Japan. All of them were freshmen majoring in life sciences: 103 males and 41 females ranging in age from 18 to 20. The English course was a one-semester course starting in April and ending in July. It was required of all freshmen. The students were divided into four classes of 'English I' (the approximate number of students was 36 in each class), and two Japanese teachers of English (one male and one female) taught two classes of the course. All the classes met once a week and lasted 90 minutes. All subjects were native speakers of Japanese and of Japanese nationality.

3.2　Measurement instruments

The data was gathered in the first semester in 2010. In April, a questionnaire including the Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale (25 items), the Strength of Motivation

Scale (7 items), and the Can-do Scale (15 items) was introduced to the students in all four classes during class time. All the scales were originally written in English, and translated Japanese versions of the scales were used. The students were asked to complete the questionnaire within 10 minutes. The questionnaire items are presented in Appendix A.

The Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale (FLSES) was developed by Hassan (2001). After studying related literature on existing self-esteem scales and questionnaires, Hassan constructed this 25-item instrument. The scale consists of the items dealing with four different aspects of foreign language learning self-esteem 1) language ability, 2) actual in-class language use, 3) in-class relationships, and 4) attitude toward / behavior in the foreign language class. In the present study, the term "foreign language (FL)" in Hassan's original scale was replaced with the term "English." An example of an item on the scale was "My ability to learn English is high."

The Strength of Motivation Scale was developed by Ely (1986) for measuring motivational strength amongst university students in a foreign language classroom. This scale was slightly modified for use in the Japanese EFL classroom, such as replacing the term "foreign language" with "English language." An example of an item on the scale was "Outside the class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in class."

For the FLSES and the Strength of Motivation Scale, a five-point Likert response scale was used for each item. A student's endorsement of "strongly agree" was equated with a numerical value of 5, "agree" with 4, "neither agree nor disagree" with 3, "disagree" with 2, and "strongly disagree" with 1. A higher score on the FLSES and the motivation scale indicated a higher level of self-esteem and motivation, respectively. These two scales included some reversed items, and for these items, the numerical values were reversed when computed. The possible scores on the FLSES ranged from 25 to 125 (5×25) and on the motivation scale, from 7 to 35 (5×7).

In order to measure self-perceived Japanese language ability in college learning situations in the U.S., Kitano (2001) modified the Can-do Scale originally developed by Clark (1981). In the present study, Kitano's version was used. The term, "Japanese" in Kitano's scale was replaced with the term "English." An example of an item on the scale was "I can say the days of the week in English." For the Can-do Scale, a three-point Likert response scale was used for each item, a practice originally conducted by Kitano on the scale. A student's endorsement of "quite easily" was equated with a numerical value of 3, "with some difficulty" with 2, and "with great difficulty or not at all" with 1. A higher score on the scale indicated a higher level of self-perception of English proficiency. The possible scores on the scale ranged from 15 to 45 (3×15).

On completion of the data collection, first, all the scales were tested for reliability. After reliability was established, a series of correlation analyses were performed amongst the scales and the English ability measurement.

3.3 English ability measurement

A C-test (Takahashi 2004) was used in order to measure the English proficiency of the students. The test consisted of five short passages chosen from three different textbooks (Heyer 1998, Hill 1998, and Hill 1974). In these passages, the second half of every second word beginning in the second sentence was deleted. The overall number of deletions in the test was 100. The test was administered to the subjects during their class of 'English I' in April, 2010: the students were asked to fill in the deletions in 15 minutes. The C-test is presented in Appendix B.

4　Results

The Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale yielded an internal consistency of .83 using Cronbach's alpha coefficient. The internal consistency of the Strength of Motivation Scale was .73, and of the Can-do Scale it was .89. Table 1 shows a comparison of the reliabilities of the present scales and those of previous studies.

Table 1 Reliabilities of the scales in comparison with previous studies

Scales	Present Study	Previous Studies
FLSES (25 items)	α =.83, N=144	α =NA, N=132 (Hassan, 2001)
Motivation (7 items)	α =.73, N=144	α =.79, N=98 (Takahashi, 2008)
		α =.86, N=50 (Ely, 1986)
Can-do (15 items)	α =.89, N=144	α =.84, N=98 (Takahashi, 2009)
		α =.92, N=212 (Kitano, 2001)

* α =Cronbach's alpha; N=number of subjects; NA=not applicable

For the FLSES, Cronbach's alpha was not available in the original study conducted by Hassan (2001), but we consider that the alpha of .83 in the present study was satisfactorily high. The alpha of the Motivation Scale was lower than the previous studies, but considering that the number of items in the scale was small (7), we consider this alpha also fairly high. Although the alpha of the Can-do Scale was lower than that from Kitano's study, it was higher than Takahashi's previous study (2009).

The statistical data of the scales is presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Statistical data of the scales

Scales	Mean average score	Standard deviation	Range (possible range)
FLSES	59.43	9.64	40-89 (25-125)
Motivation	20.65	4.60	7-32 (7-35)
Can-do	20.96	4.01	15-40 (15-45)

The mean average score of the FLSES in the present study was 59.43. Considering it was 77.21 (N=132) in the previous study by Hassan (2001), the Japanese EFL students had significantly lower self-esteem than their counterparts in Egypt. The mean average score of the motivation scale (20.65) was lower than the one from Takahashi's (2008) previous research (22.40, standard deviation = 5.27). The middle point for this scale was 21, and the results revealed that the subjects' motivational strength for learning English was moderate. The mean average of the self-perception scale amongst the present subjects (20.96) was considerably lower than the middle point (30) of the scale and that of Takahashi's (2009) previous study (30.04, SD = 6.98), indicating that the present subjects' overall self-perception of their own English ability was rather low.

After reliability was established, in order to investigate relationships between self-esteem, motivational strength, self-perception of English ability, and actual proficiency, a correlation analysis was performed amongst the three scales and the C-test. Table 3 presents the results from the correlation analysis.

Table 3 Correlations

	Self-esteem	Motivation	S-perception	Proficiency
Self-esteem		.545**	.554**	.180*
Motivation	.545**		.357**	.183*
S-perception	.554**	.357**		.313**
Proficiency	.180**	.183*	.313**	

＊ **=p<.01；*=p<.05

Self-esteem was significantly positively correlated with strength of motivation and self-perceived English proficiency. It was also positively related to actual English proficiency, although weakly. The present subjects with higher levels of self-esteem showed higher levels of motivation for learning English, perceived their English ability as being higher, and had higher English proficiency.

In order to investigate particular attributes of self-esteem, motivational strength, and self-perception of proficiency, an item analysis of the scales was carried out. The items which received the highest and the lowest endorsements were examined. For the self-esteem scale, the following were the items with the highest and lowest endorsements (the mean average endorsements are marked in parentheses):

Item 22: I miss many English class sessions. (reversed item) (4.39 [maximum score = 5.00])
Item 20: I attend English class sessions on time. (4.26)

Item 5: I can speak English very well. (1.28 [minimum score = 1.00])
Item 8: I have some English reading habits. (1.34)
Item 4: I participate effectively in English discussions. (1.45)

Item 2: I express myself freely in English. (1.47)
Item 1: My ability to learn English is high. (1.48)

The majority of the subjects did not miss their English class sessions (Item 22) and attended them on time (Item 20). Both of these items deal with attendance. The students may have thought that their teacher would not fail them as long as they attended the class.

Most of them did not think they could speak English very well (Item 5). They did not have English reading habits (Item 8), participate effectively in English discussions (Item 4), or express themselves freely in English (Item 2). They thought their English ability was not high (Item 1). Three of these items deal with speaking English. It may well be that speaking the target language is the area the students thought they were weak in.

For the Strength of Motivation Scale, the items with the highest endorsements were the following:

Item 7: I don't really feel that learning English is valuable to me. (reversed item)
    (3.77 [maximum score = 5.00])
Item 4: I want to be able to use English in a wide variety of situations. (3.69)

No single item had an endorsement lower than 2.4, and this might show that the subjects' motivation for learning English was not very low. However, at the same time, the highest average endorsement of 3.77 was not high. Judging also from the mean average score of the scale (20.65), the motivational levels of the present subjects were rather low, although they realized that learning English was valuable to them (Item 7) and wanted to be able to use it in a variety of situations (Item 4).

For the Can-do scale, only two items received an endorsement of over 2.0 (middle point).

Item 1: I can say the days of the week in English. (2.79 [maximum score = 3.00])
Item 2: I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.13)

These two items were also strongly endorsed in the previous studies (Takahashi 2009 and 2010), indicating that the previous and present subjects at least had confidence in saying the days of the week and the date in English. The subjects were university freshmen in all these three studies and therefore, being able to say days of the week and current date was not surprising.

In the present study, all the other items received an average endorsement of lower than 1.7. Amongst them, items with the lowest endorsement were the following two:

Item 15: I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.01[minimum score = 1.00])

Item 13: I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.02)

These items also received the lowest endorsements in the previous studies (Takahashi 2009 and 2010). The mean average endorsement of 1.01 indicates that almost all the subjects thought that they could not describe the role played by Japanese business corporations in English (Item 15). The vast majority of the students judged that their English was not good enough to describe the educational system (Item 13). Even for a Japanese who is fairly proficient in English, these two tasks may be difficult. Hence, it is rather natural that almost all the university freshmen in the present study endorsed them with the lowest scores.

5 Discussion of Findings

5.1 Relationship between self-esteem and motivational strength

The results showed that students who had higher levels of self-esteem had higher motivation towards learning English, and the positive relationship between the two was fairly strong. As Dutton and Brown (1997) found previously, the self-esteem of the learners in the present study was found to predict subjects' motivational strength for learning English. The present positive relationship suggests that students who felt good about themselves as language learners were more motivated to learn English than those who did not regard themselves as good learners.

According to Rubio (2007), self-esteem is open to change during childhood, and then it becomes relatively stable. However, it is still subject to change to a lesser degree later in life. It may well be that increasing self-esteem is one of the effective ways of motivating learners and eventually raising the achievement of low-performing students. Rubio suggests that, in order to increase learners' self-esteem, learners must be competent and feel competent; what is crucial is providing them 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. As a first step in the language classroom, teachers need to understand what self-esteem is and how its applications can be implemented in the classroom. Moreover, building global self-esteem may also have favorable influences on the learners' motivation towards learning subjects other than English.

5.2 Relationships between self-esteem and self-perceived and actual English proficiency

Self-esteem of the learners was positively related to both self-perceived English

proficiency and actual proficiency. Previously, a positive relationship between self-esteem and proficiency among Iranian EFL learners was found in a study conducted by Soureshjani and Naseri (2011). Results from the present study support this finding. In the present study, the relationship between self-esteem and perceived proficiency was strong, and it was the strongest correlationship obtained. On the other hand, the relationship between self-esteem and actual proficiency was much weaker. This means that the effects of self-esteem were stronger on perception than on actual proficiency; in the EFL classroom, those who felt good about themselves and evaluated their competence higher thought their English proficiency higher than those who didn't feel good about themselves did, regardless of their actual proficiency. It may well be that if self-esteem of an English learner is high, the learner may have positive attitudes towards learning the language, experience less anxiety in the classroom, and is surer of himself/herself in his/her competence in the language. These may contribute to building a higher self-perception of proficiency. Perhaps heightening self-esteem is a key to improving confidence in learning and building up self-image as good language learners.

5.3　Other relationships between variables

The following other relationships were obtained, and all of them were positive associations: motivational strength and self-perceived English proficiency; motivational strength and actual English proficiency; and self-perceived proficiency and actual proficiency.

Students with a higher degree of motivation showed that they perceived their English proficiency higher than others. This result supports previous studies conducted by MacIntyre, Baker, Clément, and Donovan (2002) and Takahashi (2008), both of which found a positive association between higher language learning motivation and higher perceived competence. Highly motivated learners have positive attitudes towards learning, study hard and are likely to get good marks, and, because of this, they perceive their language competence higher than that of their peers.

The relationship between motivation and actual proficiency seems to be reasonable since motivation is believed to be one of the main determinants of foreign language achievement. The positive relationship between the two was confirmed in previous studies such as Sawaki (1997), Takahashi (2004), and Kondo-Brown (2006).

Students who perceived that their English proficiency was higher than others actually scored higher in the proficiency test. This finding supports Takahashi's previous studies (2008 and 2009). Perception of high proficiency might have facilitated learners' performance, and at the same time, high performance might have led to better self-perception.

6 Conclusions

The present study investigated whether or not self-esteem amongst Japanese EFL learners was related to strength of motivation for learning English, self-perceived English ability, and actual English proficiency. Self-esteem was found to be positively related to all the variables. Its positive associations with motivational intensity and self-perceived proficiency were strong, suggesting that high self-esteem is a crucial factor motivating language learners and building their confidence, and ultimately facilitating learning of the target language.

A limitation of this study is that the number of items in the motivational scale was small; it had only 7 items. Although the scale showed reliability to some degree, it could have been more reliable if we had included extra items which reflected various aspects of English learning in the Japanese EFL settings.

As we stated earlier, self-esteem in relation to EFL learning has not been thoroughly explored to this date. In order to investigate the true nature of self-esteem of language learners, a comprehensive study is warranted.

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Appendix A: Questionnaire

[1] The Foreign Language Self-Esteem Scale (mean average endorsement)

1 My ability to learn English is high. (1.48)

2 I express myself freely in English. (1.47)

3 I have a problem with some grammatical rules when writing in English. (reversed item) (1.69)

4 I participate effectively in English discussions. (1.45)

5 I can speak English very well. (1.28)

6 My understanding of what others say in English is limited. (reversed item) (2.28)

7 I speak English with a heavy Japanese accent. (reversed item) (2.49)

8 I have some English reading habits. (1.34)

9 I can write very well in English. (1.56)

10 I feel good about myself when speaking in English. (1.80)

11 I feel happy when I am with my English classmates. (2.53)

12 I can read very well in English. (1.76)

13 I don't feel at ease when I talk to my English instructors. (reversed item) (2.86)

14 I find difficulty talking in English in front of my classmates. (reversed item) (2.33)

15 My classmates are better English learners than me. (reversed item) (2.03)

16 My English instructors have high expectations of me. (3.34)

17 My English classmates do not like me. (reversed item) (3.19)

18 I can understand English very well. (1.92)

19 I am always attentive to my English instructors. (3.67)

20 I attend English class sessions on time. (4.26)

21 I volunteer myself for any English classroom activities. (2.66)

22 I miss many English class sessions. (reversed item) (4.39)

23 I avoid any discussions in English. (reversed item) (2.60)

24 I read for pleasure in English. (2.04)

25 I reluctantly participate in English classroom activities. (reversed item) (3.02)

[2] Strength of Motivation Scale (mean average endorsement)

1 Outside of class, I almost never think about what I'm learning in English class. (reversed item) (2.44)

2 If possible, I would like to take a more advanced English course. (2.43)

3 Speaking realistically, I would say that I don't try very hard to learn English. (reversed item) (2.49)

4 I want to be able to use English in a wide variety of situations. (3.69)

5 I don't really have a great desire to learn a lot of English. (reversed item) (3.06)

6 Learning English well is not really a high priority for me at this point. (reversed item) (2.76)

7 I don't really feel that learning English is valuable to me. (reversed item) (3.77)

[3] Can-do Scale (mean average endorsement)

1 I can say the days of the week in English. (2.79)

2 I can give the current date (month, day, year) in English. (2.13)

3 I can order a simple meal in a restaurant in English. (1.61)

4 I can ask for directions on the street in English. (1.63)

5 I can buy clothes in a department store in English. (1.37)

6 I can introduce myself in social situations, and use appropriate greetings and leave-taking expressions in English. (1.53)

7 I can talk about my favorite hobby at some length in English. (1.26)

8 I can describe my present job, studies, or other major life activities in English. (1.17)

9 I can explain what I did last weekend at some length in English. (1.18)

10 I can explain what I plan to be doing 5 years from now at some length in English. (1.08)

11 I can sustain everyday conversation in very polite style in English with a person much older than I am. (1.49)

12 I can sustain everyday conversation in casual style English with my native-English-speaking friend. (1.06)

13 I can describe the educational system of my own country in some detail in English. (1.02)

14 I can state and support with reasons my position on a conversational topic (for example, cigarette smoking) in English. (1.08)

15 I can describe in English the role played by Japanese business corporations in the world market. (1.01)

Appendix B: C-test (proficiency test)

A. Mary works at a bank. She beg_____ working a_____ eight o'cl_____ in th_____ morning. S_____ stops wor_____ at fi_____ o'clock i_____ the after_____ . At fi_____ o'clock t_____ bank clo_____ . Everybody go_____ home. So_____ people dri_____ home. So_____ people ta_____ the tr_____ . Some people take the bus.

B. Jack and Ann are married. They are not happy together. Why not? They ar_____ very diff_____ . Jack smo_____ . Ann doe_____ smoke. Ja_____ likes t_____ watch base_____ on T_____ . Ann doe_____ like base_____ . Ann lik_____ loud mus_____ . Jack doe_____ like lo_____ music. Ja_____ snores a_____ night. A_____ can't sle_____ . One d_____ , Ann loo_____ at t_____ house ne_____ door. It is for sale. Ann buys the house and moves in.

C. Camille was three years old. She lived in a small town in France. Her fat_____ worked fa_____ away i_____ the ci_____ . Her mot_____ worked i_____ the ho_____ . One Satu_____ , Camille's mot_____ fell do_____ on th_____ floor. H_____ eyes we_____ closed. Sh_____ did n_____ move. Cami_____ father w_____ home. H_____ called th_____ doctor o_____ the telephone. The doctor came to help Camille's mother.

D. Mr. Jones was very angry with his wife, and she was very angry with her husband. For seve_____ days th_____ did n_____ speak t_____ each oth_____ at a_____ . One even_____ Mr. Jo_____ was ve_____ tired wh_____ he ca_____ back fr_____ work, s_____ he we_____ to be_____ soon af_____ dinner. O_____ course, h_____ did n_____ say anyt_____ to M_____ Jones bef_____ he we_____ upstairs. Mrs. Jones washed the dinner things and then did some sewing.

E. Early one morning, an old woman was walking from her village to the town, carrying a big sack of cabbages on her head. She wa_____ taking th_____ to t_____ market, whe_____ she ho_____ to se_____ them t_____ the peo_____ from th_____ town. T_____ road whi_____ the o_____ woman wa_____ on w_____ a nar_____ one ov a moun_____. There was a cliff on one side, and a wall of rock on the other.