

Academic Self-concept in EFL Learning:A Reflective Perspective towards Improving Students' Academic Performance

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Abstract

Basing on a self-concept theory perspective, this study is an attempt to examine the relationship between self-concept, motivation and academic achievement among a sample of adolescent students from BENAHMED Bekhedda secondary school in Zemmora, Relizane within the age range of 16-20 years. Two research instruments involved the use of: (1) a modified version of Self-Description Questionnaire developed by Marsh (1992) and (2) a semi structured interview. The data collected out of these research instruments were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively.

Keywords: Self-concept; EFL Learning; Academic Achievement; Academic Motivation; Secondary School.

Resumé

Basée sur une perspective théorique de soi, cette étude tente d'examiner la relation entre concept de soi, motivation et réussite scolaire parmi un échantillon d'élèves adolescents de l'école secondaire BENAHMED Bekhedda de Zemmora, Relizane, âgés de 16 à 20 ans. Deux instruments de recherche sont impliqués: (1) l'utilisation d'une version modifiée du questionnaire d'auto-description mis au point par Marsh (1992) et (2) un entretien semi-structuré. Les données recueillies à partir de ces instruments de recherche ont été analysées quantitativement et qualitativement.

Mots-clés: Concept de soi; EFL Learning; Réussite scolaire; Motivation académique; École secondaire.

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1 - Introduction

Motivating students, during adolescence, to keep them engaged in school tasks has become an important concern for educators, researchers, teachers and parents. At an age of an overwhelming globalization where economic, political and cultural relations and the amazing technological advance are the major characteristics of development, quality and degree of performance have become the key factors for personal progress. This strong desire for achievement puts a lot of pressure on students, teachers and schools and, in general, the educational system. Integrating such a process, the Algerian educational policy set high priorities for language learning outcomes. Since the independence, it has undergone a multitude of reforms to overcome the obstacles so as to enable the Algerian student to reach an acceptable level of instruction as well as master such skills as collaboration, language proficiency, digital literacy, critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. The main objective has been to meet the requirements of 21st century education and endow the Algerian learners with enough aptitudes to function in today's world. The actual challenge has been how to integrate our students in such a competitive learning process and assure positive outcomes. The issue has met the major concern of educationists, psychologists and all of those connected to the educational process on how to put forward strategies and tools to initiate, direct and maintain students' optimum motivation, especially during adolescence.

Understanding adolescents' academic self-beliefs and motivation, particularly in foreign language learning, is fundamental to ensure that secondary school students achieve their potential and guide their behaviour towards a specific goal. Yet, low academic performance rates have been recorded among secondary school students, especially during late adolescence. Year after year, many of them find themselves in a state in which they do not have the desire to go through the different classroom assignments nor even have the will to carry out their studies. They

do not pay attention to what the teacher is doing in class and are caught engaged in other parallel activities.

For such an issue, a variety of studies have been performed to evaluate the amount of the students' underachievement in academic setting. The ministry of national education has attempted many reforms to boost learners' academic engagement and scholastic success. However, it is useful to understand, at this stage, that the degree to which the students engage in academic assignments does not depend, solely, on improving their cognitive skills through the development of adequate textbooks and curricula but also on considering the potential of non-cognitive factors that play a key role in enhancing their academic performance. It is primordial for teachers to take into account their students' motivation, attitudes towards the learning outcomes and educational aspirations besides their deep belief that one is capable of constructing quite achievable goals.

For such a statement, the following research questions are formulated to guide this study:

1. What does the relationship between self-concept, motivation and academic achievement in EFL learning imply for the third year secondary school students?
2. Are there statistically significant differences in the level of language learning beliefs, motivation and academic achievement in relation to gender among third year secondary school students?
3. What are the adolescent students' academic beliefs about the factors that affect their motivation and academic success in language learning?

The following hypotheses are set to answer the framed research questions. They are formulated in null form for empirical corroboration:

H₀₁: The relationship between self-concept and motivation in EFL learning has no implications for the third year secondary school students' academic achievement.

H₀₂: There are no statistically significant differences in the level of language learning beliefs, motivation and academic achievement in relation to gender among third year secondary school students.

H₀₃: The adolescent students do not hold any self-beliefs in regard to the factors that they believe affect their academic self-concept and academic achievement.

The focal point of the present study is to investigate students' academic beliefs about their abilities to learn a foreign language as it is one of the most extensively studied areas in the field of educational psychology.

2 Review of Related Literature

.2.1 Academic Self-concept

The study of the nature and structure of one's self-perceptions has been the major concern of a great deal of psychological and educational research. According to Drew and Watkins (1998), self-concept is a psychological construct which refers to a cluster of ideas and attitudes an individual holds about himself/herself. Hardy (2013) defined self-concept as a *"hypothetical construct that helps explain and predict an individual's behaviour. It includes elements of reciprocity, where individuals' actions influence their self-perceptions and perceptions of self, in turn, influence their actions"*. Self-concept study includes four major areas: academic self-concept, social self-concept, physical self-concept and emotional self-concept. This study, however, focuses on the students' self-perceptions in academic settings in general and EFL classroom in particular. Cokley (2000) considered academic self-concept to be how a student views his/her academic ability when compared to other students. Ireson and Hallam (2009) stated that it can be defined as students' perception of their competence, involvement and interest in schoolwork. In such a perspective, the more students hold positive perceptions about their academic abilities the more they attain academically. In the field of language learning, Victori and Lockhart (1995) characterized learners' self-concepts and beliefs as *"general assumptions that students hold*

about themselves as learners and about the nature of their learning” (p. 224), They, further, explained that learners do not, typically, participate in learning tasks for which they believe they are not skilful enough. Accordingly, their beliefs about their abilities influence *“the choices they make, the effort they put forth, their inclinations to persist at certain tasks, and their resiliency in the face of failure.”* (Zeldin & Pajares, 2000: 215).

1.2.2 Academic Motivation

Academic motivation is among the most prominent determinants of students’ success or failure in school (Hidi & Harackiewicz, 2000). Despite the uncontested position of motivation in learning, there is, in fact, no agreement on the exact definition of motivation. Brophy (1998) defined it as a theoretical construct that is used to explain the initiation, direction, intensity and persistence of behaviour. On the same vein, Greenberg and Baron (2003) delineated it as: *“the set of processes that arouse, direct, and maintain human behaviour towards attaining some goal”* (p. 190). Pintrich and Schunk (1996) considered academic motivation to be an integral part of learning. They argued that students who are motivated to learn are keen to engage in activities that they believe will help them learn such as attending carefully to the instruction, taking notes to facilitate subsequent studying, checking their level of understanding and asking for help when they do not understand the material. In contrast, students who are unmotivated, to learn, are not enthusiastic in their learning efforts. They may be inattentive during the lesson. They may not monitor their level of understanding or ask for help when they do not understand what is being taught. (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996, cited in Dörnyei, 1998:118).

2.3 Self-concept, Motivation, and Academic Achievement

During the past few decades, researchers have been much concerned with the potential role of the affective factors such as academic self-concept and motivation to impact on students’ scholastic performance. Guay et al. (2010) carried out an empirical research that focused on two motivational factors regularly associated with academic achievement. They are

autonomous motivation and academic self-concept. Their conclusions stressed the important role that the two affective constructs play in student academic attainment. In their turn, Marsh et al. (2005) suggested that improving students' academic achievement without enhancing their self-concept and motivation, in related academic domains, is most likely to lead to only short term gain.

Most current research in educational psychology have attempted to analyse the different types of relationships that are likely to exist between self-concept and academic performance (Sanchez & Roda, 2004). Three causal models have been identified: (1) *the Skill Development Model* which supports that academic performance determines self-concept (Green et al., 2006), (2) *the Self-Enhancement Model* which sustains that the level of self-concept determines the degree of academic achievement (Valentine, Dubois., & Cooper, 2004), and finally (3) *the Reciprocal Effects Model*, which postulates that self-concept and academic performance influence and determine each other mutually (Guay, Marsh & Boivin, 2003).

3. METHOD AND TOOLS:

A convenience sampling technique was employed to select a representative sample of the subjects in this study. They are thirty-five (35) third year scientific stream students. The sample consisted of 19 females and 16 males within the age range of 16-20 years.

The participants' age, gender and stream of study are shown in the following table:

Table 1. The Participants' age and gender

Gender	3 rd Sc.exp	Age average	Percentage
Male	16	17 -20	45,71%
Female	19	17 -20	54,29%
Total	35		100 %

A modified version of Self-Description Questionnaire (SDQ II), developed by Marsh (1992), was employed to measure

students' academic self-perceptions in learning English. The academic self-concept scale, used in the study, consists of pre-section including information regarding students' language level, gender, age, and the mark obtained in English as well as two subscales to measure students' academic competence and academic effort. The academic confidence subscale measured their perceptions towards their English academic ability and the academic effort subscale assessed their motivation and interest in English schoolwork. The items were rated on a scale ranging from 1 = *Definitely False* to 5= *Definitely true*.

The second instrument, of the study, consisted of a semi-structured interview to evaluate the sample's academic beliefs that affect their motivation and academic success in language learning.

After being permitted to conduct the study at BENAHMED Bekhedda secondary school Zemmora, wilaya of Relizane, the researcher delivered the questionnaire and explained the purpose of the study. The participants were asked to complete the different items. They had about 20 minutes to go through the different items of the questionnaires during class time. The second instrument involved a semi- structured interview that involved four students (2 males and 2 females) who agreed to answer the different questions of the interview. It is worth mentioning that all these research instruments were administered in the secondary school setting along the third term of the school year 2017-2018.

4- RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey questionnaire, completed by the respondents, was coded in regard to (male/female; high /moderate /low achievement groups) then analysed descriptively. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 19.0 for Windows was employed to analyse the quantitative data from students' academic self-perceptions in learning English. The first quantitative descriptive analysis was performed to compute percentages, means and standard deviations of the self-concept

scale and subscales. The second qualitative analytic method was used to examine the data from the semi-structured interview.

4.1 Students' self-concept and academic motivation

The first research question was about the relationship between the third year secondary school students' academic self-concept and their motivation in regard of their academic achievement in English language learning. In order to answer the above mentioned research question, the data of the students' scores on academic self-concept questionnaire and their general achievement in English subjects were computed to obtain the final relationship between these two variables.

4.2 EFL learners' motivational orientations

In order to apprehend students' self-perceptions of their academic abilities in EFL learning, a first item intended to investigate their reasons of learning English covering a list of possibilities shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' motivational orientations

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
To do well in my examination	5	14.28%
A compulsory subject in the syllabus and the final exam	4	11.42%
Interest in English language, people and culture	24	68,57 %
To sing and listen to English songs	4	11.42%
For the future job	20	57,14%
To study abroad	11	31,4%

Table 2 reveals that the students concentrated on the reason that learning English will allow them to be at ease with people speaking the language. In fact 68, 57 % of the respondents showed their interest in English language, people and culture. The second and third main reasons were linked to their concern with their future careers and study abroad (57, 14% and 31, 4% respectively). Surprisingly, only 14.28% of the students affirmed that the English achievement scores could help them to do well in their examination and that 11.42% were learning English because it is a compulsory subject in the syllabus and the

final exam. One possible reason to these low percentages was the low coefficient of English for the scientific stream students who tend to be more concerned with the scientific subjects as they hold the greatest coefficients and can influence greatly their averages in exams. In sum, the motivational orientations, possessed by the third year sample students, were quite varied. The highest percentages distinguished those who possessed nearly equal rates of both intrinsic and extrinsic types of motivation.

4.3 EFL learners' academic effort

Along with high aptitudes and positive attitudes goes the amount of academic effort furnished by students in EFL classroom context and even out of it. The degree of language learning achievement depends on the degree of effort that students make. Therefore, the aim of the inquiry was to corroborate students' claims and opinions considering their EFL learning. The results are demonstrated in Figure.1

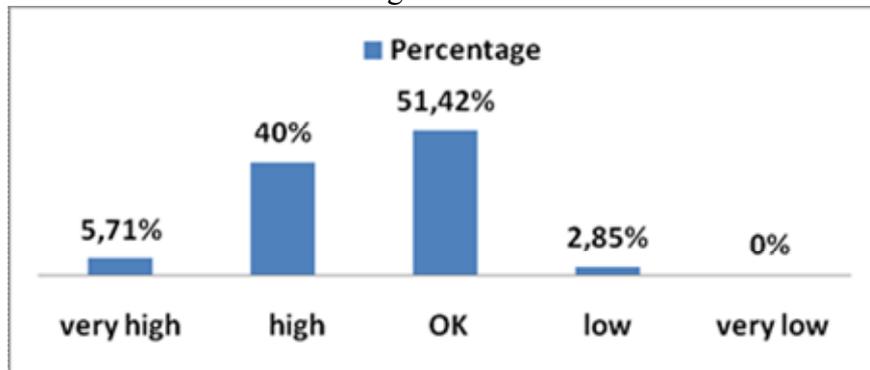


Fig. 1. Students' effort in learning English

The figure illustrates that 18 respondents (51, 42%) answered that they furnished average effort while 40% of them claimed that their effort in learning the target language was high. Only two students said that they made very high effort to succeed in their learning. One respondent avowed that he did nothing to improve his level of language learning.

4.4 EFL learners' self-perceptions of their academic competence

The questionnaire (SDQ II), mainly, attempted to measure students' academic self-concept. It was subdivided into scoring their English academic competence as well as their academic effort in EFL learning. The overall results are shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Students' overall scores on self-concept

ASC scale	Mean	SD
EAC	2.96	0.40
EAE	2.59	0.63
Students' self-concept	2,77	

Note. EAC= English academic competence, EAE= English academic effort, ASC = Academic Self-Concept, SD = standard deviation

The scores of the ASC scales came into agreement with the above mentioned results related to the third year secondary school sample's motivational orientations and academic effort.

The students' English academic competence score was quite moderate ($M=2.96$). The Table shows, further that their English academic effort is less than the average required ($M=2.59$). The findings, thus, reveal that students have moderate perceptions about themselves ($M=2.77$). With regard to the standard deviations, it is clear that the participants, involved in the study, are a homogeneous group who understand the concept under study almost at the same level ($SD=0.40$ and $SD= 0.63$ respectively).

4.5 EFL learners' self-concepts and motivation beliefs across gender

The descriptive statistics of students' self-concept scale scores, according to gender, are represented as follows:

Table 4. Students' overall scores on self-concept across gender

ASC scale	Gender	Mean	SD
EAC	Male	2.65	0.96
	Female	3.27	0.56
EAE	Male	2.18	0.65
	Female	3.01	0.40

The study was, also, interested in exploring the possible differences in the level of language learning beliefs, motivation and academic achievement in relation to gender differences among third year secondary school students. Thus, the data were analysed with respect to male and female participants. As shown in Table 4, female participants showed more academic competence and effort than males ($M=3.19$ and $M=3.01$ for females; $M=2.65$ and $M=2.18$ for males).

In a comparison of the sample's English academic performance, the findings revealed a slight statistical significance in terms of language learning achievement among male and female student participants with female participants performing better than male students (31, 57%, 18, and 75% respectively). Besides, female students' mean average was (11.25) in comparison to the male students' one which was (10.05) (see Table 5).

	Gender	N	Frequency	Percentages
Low achievers	Male	16	10	62,5%
	Female	19	9	47,36%
Average	Male	16	3	18,75%
	Female	19	4	21,05%
High achievers	Male	16	3	18,75%
	Female	19	6	31,57%
Mean Average	Male	10.05		
	Female	11.25		

Table 5: Students' scores in English and gender differences

Thus, the study findings agree with most studies which suggest that, on average, girls do better, in school, than boys. Girls get higher grades and complete high school at a higher rate compared to boys (Jacobs & Eccles, 2002; Steinmayr & Spinath, 2008 Al-Bustan & Al-Bustan, 2009; Ghazvini and Khajehpour, 2011).

4.6 Students' academic beliefs

The third research question, dealing with the sample's academic beliefs that affect their motivation and academic success in language learning, required an analytical interpretation of the interview. It involved four third year secondary school students represented in 2 males and 2 females.

When asked about their academic self-perceptions and effort in English learning, almost all the participants explained that they aspire to be proficient in the language but they feel reluctant about that. When asked about the main reasons behind their unenthusiastic behaviour, they stated that English is considered as a secondary subject with a low coefficient and that their priorities are raised towards the scientific subjects, mainly, physics, mathematics and science. Other reasons were explained. They involved the students' low proficiency level, the teaching methods, teacher's uneven allocation of turns, type of activities assigned by their English teacher, classroom atmosphere, and most above all their fear of mistakes. When asked about their beliefs about the factors that can help them improve their proficiency skills, the interviewees stressed the teacher's clear instruction, logical teaching steps as well as good rapports with the students. Almost all participants agreed that the teacher's characteristics and behaviour in class, being enthusiastic, friendly and helpful, are a supportive factor to their successful learning and motivation, The students believed that creating interesting games and activities are actions that could help them reduce stress, feel relaxed and become more active in learning the language.

5- CONCLUSION

The first objective of the study was concerned with EFL learners' self-concepts and beliefs as language learners. The findings revealed that the participants, most likely, had some impeding perceptions and beliefs which affect negatively their linguistic performance. As a result, the students' reluctance to take part in academic assignments was not the expression of their lack of knowledge or inability to acquire the language but, rather, a lack of confidence in their academic abilities and diverged

orientations concerning other domain-specific subjects. Concerning the affective constructs, the participants had distinctive affective concerns. Most of the participants displayed a moderate effort in completing their tasks and revealed to hold confused beliefs about their academic potentials. The findings implied that almost all of the participants felt disappointed with their personal academic performance. The findings of the study, mostly, emphasized the students' need for their teachers' guidance and clear instruction. It seems that EFL teachers need to closely watch their learners' perceptions and interaction with their learning environment.

Therefore, it appears to be quite reasonable to adapt the teaching methods in a way that EFL students learn English in a more communicative and supportive environment. Hence, EFL teachers can help establish a cooperative atmosphere in the classroom by encouraging collaborative learning and guide the EFL learners to relate their academic beliefs to their learning objectives. It is recommended that EFL teachers focus on more communicative language teaching approaches in an adequate learning environment so that they can overcome their learners' lack of motivation and negative perception of the EFL classroom.

The second common objective, in this study, was to evaluate academic differences among male and female EFL learners. The findings revealed female students to be more active language learners. The third objective was to explore the participants' academic beliefs about the factors that affect their motivation and academic success in language learning. The sample explained the major reasons obstructing their learning process. They emphasized their pressing need to feel accepted and guided by their EFL teachers, the fact that, reinforces the major recommendations stated in this study.

This research, study was limited in some ways to the participants who represented one secondary school stream. Further research may incorporate a larger sample of participants from a more representative number of streams. Secondly, other

variables that may influence language learning could be used extensively to compare and contrast the actual results.

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