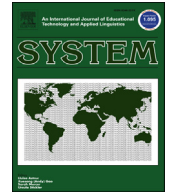


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A study of self-concept in reading in a second or foreign language in an academic context



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 23 April 2014

Received in revised form 19 October 2014

Accepted 4 January 2015

Available online 2 February 2015

Keywords:

Self-concept

Discourse

Reading

Academic

Second language

Foreign language

International education

ABSTRACT

This longitudinal, mixed methods study focused on the nature of, and changes in, second or foreign language (L2) reading self-concepts among international students studying on a pre-master's course. The study builds on previous research in the area of reading self-concept, but views the self as a frame for the discourse of reflexive self-beliefs. A framework was developed which showed how L2 reading self-perceptions can be linked in important ways to personal histories, motivational processes and the situational context. The findings included insights into how self-concepts of reading differed according to competence perceptions and levels of English language ability, as well as an analysis of the ways in which these self-views changed over the duration of the course. It is hoped that the study will provide insights into how students in international education situations experience learning to read and learning through reading simultaneously so that educators can support them more effectively.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1950s, the self-concept construct has been considered important in education because of its apparent link with students' achievement, motivation and engagement with learning (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Burns, 1982; Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010; Leary & Tangney, 2003a; Shavelson, Hubner, & Stanton, 1976). Recently the concept of self has become of particular interest in second or foreign language (L2) learning (e.g.: Csizer & Magid, 2014; Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2009; Mercer, 2011; Mercer & Williams, 2014), although it was some time ago when Hosenfeld noted that successful readers in a foreign language have "good self-concepts as a reader" and unsuccessful readers have poor self-concepts (Hosenfeld, 1984, p. 233). But what do good and poor reading self-concepts look like? What might students' self-concepts reveal about how, over a period of time, they deal with the task of reading in another language, especially in academic contexts where reading is crucial for learning and achievement? This article reports on an investigation into the nature and development of L2 reading self-concepts among students taking a one-year pre-master's course at a UK university.

2. Literature review

Since the concepts of self and self-concept have a long history of exploration and enquiry in psychology, a brief overview of approaches is provided. In addition, an explanation is given of the theoretical stance which is taken on the self-concept for the purposes of this mixed methods study.

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In cognitive psychology the self is considered an important explanatory construct in research into individual differences in human behaviour (e.g.: Cross & Markus, 1991; Dörnyei, 2009; Leary & Tangney, 2003b; Markus & Nurius, 1986). In general, the self concerns the reflexive capacity, or knowledge about, and attitudes to, oneself, and how this knowledge guides actions (Baumeister, 1999; Leary & Tangney, 2003a; Reeve, 2005; Sedikides & Skowronski, 2003). The self-concept construct, in particular, usually represents a focus on self-knowledge (Foddy & Kashima, 2002), or perceptions about the self (Shavelson et al., 1976). Debate over the structure of the self-concept is ongoing. For example, is there a global self-concept subdivided into increasingly specific domains (Marsh, Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Shavelson et al., 1976), or a central, unitary, fixed core self with a peripheral, continuously developing 'working' self-concept, or does the self actually consist of multiple selves (Showers & Zeigler-Hill, 2005)? The extent to which the self-concept is stable or malleable is another area of discussion (Kernis & Goldman, 2005). Early work, such as Shavelson et al. (1976), characterised the self-concept as hard to change, though with key stages of development. Later, Burden (2005, p. 59) noted that academic self-concept can change according to "developing skills, increased attainment and growth of self-confidence and learner autonomy". In the area of foreign language learning, Mercer (2011) showed that the self-concept can exhibit both stable and dynamic elements simultaneously.

In research into self-concept within the cognitive paradigm, extensive use has been made of self-report questionnaires and statistical analysis. In the academic domain, the focus has tended to be on measuring self-perceptions of competence (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991), though "interest, enjoyment, and intentions" may also be included (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003, p. 29), as well as emotions and feelings towards the domain in question (Byrne, 1996; Marsh, 1990; Marsh & Gouvernet, 1989). Importance is also measured in some research since it is argued that ability will only matter if the activity is important to the individual (Harter, 1999; Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991).

Self-concept and motivation are often seen as closely linked (e.g.: Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Chapman, Tunmer, & Prochnow, 2000; Guay et al., 2010; Harter & Connell, 1984; Higgins, 1987; Ushioda, 2014; Wigfield & Karpathian, 1991), and a different perspective on the variables in the preceding paragraph is taken in the expectancy-value motivation paradigm associated with Wigfield and colleagues (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold, & Blumenfeld, 1993; Wigfield, 1994; Wigfield & Eccles, 1992). In this approach elements such as interest, enjoyment, usefulness and importance are called "task values" and are viewed as functioning differently from self-perceptions of competence. Task values are said to influence choice of, and persistence in, activities while task specific beliefs (that is, the individual's self-concept of ability and perception of task difficulty) determine expectations of successful outcomes. Task values themselves may be influenced by long and short-term goals (Miller & Brickman, 2004; Wigfield, 1994).

Studies of reading self-concept in the quantitative tradition have included Chapman and Tunmer, who examined first language reading self-concepts in young children using a Reading Self-concept Scale with three subscales: attitude towards reading, perception of difficulty and perception of competence in reading (Chapman & Tunmer, 1995, 1999; Chapman et al., 2000). Walker (2006), using this scale as a basis, investigated L2 reading self-concept in a cross-sectional study and found similar, positively intercorrelated dimensions. Some other writers who have researched L2 reading self-beliefs are van Kraayenoord and Schneider (1999), Mori (2002), Takase (2007) and Kondo-Brown (2009), but these studies focussed primarily on reading motivation, not self-concept.

However, the quantitative, cognitive psychological approach to the study of the self and the self-concept has certain limitations. First, enquiry has often been limited to cross-sectional studies which have implied that the self-concept is a static, fixed entity (Byrne, 1996; Tanti, Stukas, Halloran, & Foddy, 2008). In addition, researchers have complained of poor construct validity because of disagreements over theoretical and operational definitions (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Burden, 1998, 2010; Byrne, 1996; Ferla, Valcke, & Cai, 2009; Mercer, 2011). Furthermore, it has been pointed out that self-reports are self-defining: for example, Bruner observed that: "...with the study of the self: 'it' is whatever is measured by tests of the self-concept..." (1990, pp. 101–102). Thus, there is a need to investigate whether the L2 reading self-concept really consists only of the competence, difficulty and affect dimensions mentioned above. Moreover, longitudinal investigation will reveal how L2 reading self-concept might change with developing skills.

Also, social contextual considerations have tended to be overlooked in favour of research into internal mental structure and cognitive processes (Potter, 2006; Smith-Lovin, 2002; Tanti et al., 2008). Bruner pointed out that expectancy-value theories (e.g. Wigfield (1994)) do not address the social foundations of task values and self-perceptions, which are, self-evidently, the cultural elements shared by the community and which "become incorporated into one's self-identity and... locate one in a culture" (Bruner, 1990, p. 29). Thus consideration of the social origins of the self is clearly needed for a full understanding of an individual's L2 reading self-concept. As Ushioda argues (2009, pp. 216–220), language learning is not just a cognitive, psycholinguistic process: language learners need to be seen as "people who are necessarily located in particular cultural and historical contexts".

A symbolic interactionist/social constructivist approach to academic self-beliefs is that of Pollard and Filer (1996). Using a wide range of qualitative data collected over a seven-year period Pollard and Filer were able to track schoolchildren's developing interactions with meanings in their learning environment in detailed ways which a cross-sectional, purely quantitative approach could not have achieved. The resulting framework (Pollard & Filer, 1996, p. 97) depicts a cycle of learning in which students' social identities influence their "learning stance". This concept combines self-confidence, motivation and strategic resources, giving the learner "a sense of control or otherwise" (Pollard & Filer, 1996, p. 10). In the classroom, students first perceive challenges and then respond according to their learning stance while interacting with the learning context. Ultimately, the outcomes of learning impact on self-views. From this work it can be seen that, as Elliott (2005, p. 173) notes, "...qualitative approaches allow for a conception of the self as being socially constructed [as well as] constantly revised and negotiated".

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