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The relationship between academic self-concept, attributions, and L2 achievement

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 29 December 2012

Received in revised form 7 January 2014

Accepted 9 January 2014

Keywords:

Academic self-concept

Attributions

Motivation

Language learning achievement

ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between academic self-concept, classroom test performance, and causal attribution for achievement among Turkish students. 267 Year 6 students from six different cities in Turkey participated in the study. Academic self-concept was measured by means of the Myself-As-a-Learner Scale (MALS) while attributions were elicited through a specifically designed attribution questionnaire. Achievement was measured by course achievement tests. Analysis of the data revealed that teacher was the most frequent attribution for test scores followed by ability, interest, and long term effort. Academic self-concept (high vs. low) and test performance (good vs. poor) exerted a main effect but yielded together no interaction effect on attributions. Multiple regression analysis showed that a set of ability attribution, academic self-concept, interest attribution, and teacher attribution were the best predictors of test performance. As the most frequent attributions and predictors of test performance were found to be mainly uncontrollable and stable, this study concludes that knowledge of student attributions and academic self-concept can provide useful information to teachers of English both at the level of prediction and intervention beyond the level of language instruction.

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1. Introduction

Human beliefs and perceptions of the self have gained increasing recognition in understanding what makes people act or refrain from acting in certain ways, and persevere in the process of learning to achieve their objectives (Dörnyei, 2009; Williams & Burden, 1997). It has often been asserted that such beliefs are alterable (Weiner, 1992) and closely linked to human motivation and can cause changes in the quantity and quality of one's motivation (Dörnyei, 2000). Williams and Burden (1997) provide a comprehensive list of such beliefs and perceptions that have been found to be prominent in determining people's motivation to learn. These, among others, include intrinsic interest of activity, perceived value of activity, locus of causality, locus of control, affective states, and self-concept. Of such factors, two that have attracted academic interest are of central importance for this paper. The first concerns learners' causal attributions for achievement while the second is academic self-concept.

This paper firstly reviews literature relating to academic self-concept, attributions in language learning, and the relationship of these concepts to achievement. The paper then describes the methodology pursued in this study to investigate the relationship between these variables and language learning. Thirdly, findings are presented and discussed in relation to current knowledge. Finally, conclusions are drawn and suggestions are made as to the implications of these findings for language teachers.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Academic self-concept

Self-concept, often referred to as personal perceptions of one's own academic abilities or skills that are developed through experience with and interpreting the learning environment, has come to be considered as one of the most prominent factors in human learning (Marsh, 1993; Marsh & Martin, 2011). A considerable amount of research has been dedicated to the influence of their self-concept on people's lives. It is often asserted that individuals' perceptions of themselves and of what is possible for the self are directly linked to 'feelings of efficacy, competence, control, or optimism, and that these provide the means by which these global constructs have their powerful impact on behaviour' (Ruvolo & Markus, 1992: 96). That is, how we see ourselves also determines how possible and realistic we perceive our future goals, and affects our motivation to act or give up (Dörnyei, 2009).

Self-concept is not a monolithic concept and is often envisaged as a multifaceted construct, subsuming domains like academic, social, and emotional self-concept (Marsh, 1993). This is because people can evaluate themselves in many different ways. For example, a person's physical or social self-image may be different from their academic self-concept. Thus, attempts to provide one all-embracing self-concept scale may not tell us much. In support of this, a comparison of the correlations, for example, between global self-concept and subject-specific self-concept and achievement, showed that the relationship between global self-concept and academic performance is weaker than that between achievement and subject-specific self-concept (Huang, 2011).

Meta-analyses of studies often indicate that academic self-concept and academic achievement are linked to each other and influence one another. Huang (2011), for example, in his meta-analysis of 39 longitudinal studies found that academic self-concept correlated significantly with achievement. Further, Marsh and Martin (2011) in their review of academic self-concept studies provide support for a reciprocal effect model (REM) that maintains that academic self-concept and academic achievement mutually reinforce each other and the interaction results in an improvement in both. Marsh and Craven (2006: 159) emphasize this point when they state: "If practitioners enhance self-concepts without improving performance, then the gains in self-concept are likely to be short-lived. If practitioners improve performance without also fostering participants' self-beliefs in their capabilities, then the performance gains are also unlikely to be long-lasting."

Self-related beliefs have now started attracting attention of researchers in the domain of language learning although such interest has been limited (Mercer, 2011a) and mainly related to self-efficacy (e.g. Cochran, McCallum, & Bell, 2010; Erlor & Macaro, 2011; Hsieh & Kang, 2010; Hsieh & Schallert, 2008; Pishghadam & Zabihi, 2011). Despite similarities, self-concept and self-efficacy refer to different constructs (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Although, both constructs are based on perceived competencies of one's abilities, the former is more global and more past experience-driven while the latter is about perception of one's own capability of how well s/he can perform in a specific task (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003). Further, past-related academic self-concept may predict self-efficacy but self-efficacy may not be just as strong a predictor of academic self-concept (Ferla, Valcke, & Chai, 2009).

Only a few studies as yet have made specific reference to the relationship between language development and academic self-concept. In first language development, academic self-concept has been found to be positively correlated to the language development of Flemish high school students (De Fraine, Van Damme, & Onghena, 2007). Marsh, Hau, and Kong (2002), in their search for support for their reciprocal effects model among Hong-Kong Chinese students, report that prior positive academic self-concept had a positive impact on achievement, general academic achievement, and language achievement alike. They also found that being taught non-English subjects in English may negatively influence academic self-concept.

One's self-concept in language learning may exhibit complexities (Mercer, 2011a, 2011b). Mercer illustrates in her case studies that language learning self-concept has a multi-layered structure comprised of both dynamic and stable aspects. Those that were dynamic often involved short-term contextual changes while those of a more stable nature concerned more global and general affective states.

2.2. Attributions

Attributions are subjective reasons and explanations given by people for why they have failed or succeeded in a given task, test, or an activity (Weiner, 1992, 2010). Traditionally, a set of four main attributions have been suggested. These are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck. However, research has identified a number of other possible attributions, such as interest, health, mood, materials, means, strategies used by learners, and significant others (Little, 1985; Peacock, 2009; Vispoel & Austin, 1995; Williams & Burden, 1999).

Weiner (1992, 2010), the originator of the attribution concept, identified three dimensions of attributions: locus of causality, stability, and control. The locus of causality refers to whether individuals perceive the cause of their performance to be internal or external to them. Internal causes are often seen as having/lacking the required ability or making/not making the necessary effort to accomplish the task. External causes, on the other hand, are, for example, how difficult/easy the task is thought to be or how lucky/unlucky individuals feel in the process of learning. The stability dimension refers to whether these causes are seen as alterable. For instance, effort is listed as an internal and unstable factor, the amount and nature of which can be changed in time. Ability, on the other hand, is usually regarded as relatively stable. The third dimension is controllability,

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