

The impact of self-perception on Iranian EFL learners' oral communication

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Abstract

This study investigates the probable relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-perception and assertiveness and their oral communication skills. A sample of 80 male and female Iranian EFL students participated in this study. The participants were initially required to complete Belbin's self-perception questionnaire, they were then asked to complete Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI). The results of the data analysis indicated that there was a strong positive correlation between the two variables and thus the higher the level of self-perception and assertiveness, the higher the level of communication will be.

Keywords: Communication Strategies, Self-perception, Assertiveness.

1. Introduction

It is commonly believed that interaction is one of the basic human needs for social well-being. Communication in any form is regarded as the most important channel for social interaction that happens all the time. Different people show react different reactions to similar actions, events, or situations (Allport, 1937, cited in Mischel, 1986). On the basis of diversity in personality types of individuals, they behave differently in various communicative situations. Therefore, interpersonal communication is worth being studied per se as a subject linked to the area of individual differences.

Mastery of speaking skills in the English language is of prime importance to many language learners no matter if they are second or foreign language learners. Foreign language learners need to equip them with a sufficient number of oral strategies to be able to solve their communication problems. Language learning strategies, as defined by Oxford (1990) as, "specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, and more transferable to new situations (p. 8)" have always been regarded as an influential factor which can enhance the level of language learners' performances.

The issue of individual differences is one of the potential elements influencing learners' different behaviors in language learning contexts. As Crozier (1997) has already stated, individual differences have the potential to affect the academic successes or failures of foreign or second language learners. Self-perception is a feeling of an individual about his/her abilities in different areas or contexts (Harter 1986). Assertive communication enables individuals to be more powerful in controlling their lives. Assertive communication also includes the ability to state what a person wants while respecting the others' rights (Pfeiffer, 2003).

However, passiveness can lead to those actions a person takes in whatever way necessary to avoid conflict. It is often accompanied by hiding personal needs and trying to avoid situations that may result in conflicts. Thus, assertiveness can be considered as a sort of positive style of behavior. Also, the self-perception ability of an individual is one of the most important parts of self-esteem (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003) which is gained through life experiences and shaped by interpersonal relationships. Given the relationship between these two important factors that is personality traits and communication, the investigation of the crucial role played by communication strategies adopted by EFL learners enjoying diverse levels of self-perception and assertiveness can have some implications for second language acquisition.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Individual differences

Individuals act differently under the same situation. They employ different approaches toward communicating with others, responding to questions and solving the problems they encounter. People also behave differently in learning contexts; each of them practices a special kind of learning style (Brown, 2000). For instance, some people learn better through pictures and visual materials, some learn better through repetition and some others get better results when they learn through active participation.

These issues sparked the interest of different scholars to investigate how individual differences affect the language learning process. Allport (1937) is among the first people who spoke about the importance of individual differences. Mischel (1986) quoted from Allport that, "no two people respond identically to the same event and each person's behavior is determined by a special trait structure" (p. 124). He believed that the way traits occur in any two people turns out to be different; each person adopts a unique ways. According to Mischel (1986), Allport (ibid) claims that since each person has his unique trait, it cannot be studied by making comparisons among people. Consequently, Allport (ibid) suggested the fully-fledged study of individuals by conducting both intensive and long-term studies. Similarly, Mischel (1986) stated, "individuals often differ in their responses and reactions to the same psychological stimulus"

(p.120). That is when different people face the same events such as various social encounters, or the same fearful experience, each of them reacts in different manners (Mischel, 1986).

A common difference between individuals is the distinct nature of males and females which has proved to be a crucial variable in a large number of academic studies. As an example, Ottenbreit (2003) studied the relationship between different gender type and discrimination and self-concept.

Looking at the issue from a different perspective, Fahim and Pishghadam (2007) examined the role of emotional intelligence in academic achievement of EFL university students. In order to measure this variable, they employed the Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory which was originally designed in 1980. This Inventory is a self-report scale designed to measure five areas of competencies as well as skills through its 133 items. One of these five competencies is Intrapersonal Skills which in turn consists of several components. One of these components is assertiveness to which 7 items are allocated. They found a statistically significant correlation between Emotional Quotient (EQ) and its competencies and a grade-point average of the students ($p < .05$).

2.2. Perception

Differences in perceptions can impact the way individuals understand events as well as other individuals. Perception can also affect the experience and communication with them. According to Egly et al. (1987), the ability to use techniques of assertiveness and self-advocacy is important for everyone. They stated that due to the circumstances surrounding learning disabled persons, it is necessary for such people to have the capacity to use assertiveness and self-advocacy skills. They are not willing to talk about their learning disability and it can overshadow their success in academic and social encounters. Egly et al. (ibid) claimed that "assertiveness and self-advocacy can provide the students with effective strategies for integrating their social and academic needs with their situational realities" (p. 3).

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

The 80 male and female people who served as the participants for this study were randomly selected from three language institutes. They had all scored 6.5 to 7 on the second version of IELTS test. Their age ranged from 18 to 28.

3.2. Instrumentation

In order to fulfill the objectives of the study, two types of questionnaires were used. The first one was Belbin's Self-perception Questionnaire. The items of the questionnaire are related to features and characteristics which determine each of these four kinds of behaviors and personality traits and try to evaluate the subjects with regard to assertive, aggressive, submissive, and passive features. This questionnaire includes seven sections. Each section contains 10 questions and each question has ten points which determine the most accurate behavior or feeling. Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI) was the second questionnaire utilized which consists of eight speaking strategy categories designed by Nakatani (2006). Thirty-two items are evaluated by a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (never or almost never true of me) to 5 (always or almost always true of me). The questionnaire was used to assess the participants' oral communication strategies.

3.3. Procedure

This study was conducted in a period of 2 months. All the items of both questionnaires were introduced to the students before being explained. First, they were required to complete the Belbin's questionnaire, and then the Oral Communication Strategies Inventory (OCSI). The design employed in this research was ex-post facto design.

4. Results

The data collected were measured on an interval scale. The participants were independent of one another, i.e. their performance on the tests was not affected by the performance of the other students. Correlation was employed to assess the relationship between students' self-perception on their oral communication skill. The correlation was statistically significant at the level of 0.01. Table 1 below provides descriptive statistics of the participants and Table 2 demonstrates the correlation between their self-perception and oral communication skills.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics both Questionnaires by the participants

	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Self-perception	654.86	56.591	50
Oral communication skills	165.80	17.795	50

Table 2. Correlations between the students' self-perception and oral communication skill

		Self-perception	Oral communication skills
Self-perception	Pearson Correlation	1	.767**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	50	50
Oral communication skills	Pearson Correlation	.767**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	50	50

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2tailed).

The relationship between self-perception and oral communication skills was investigated using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumptions of normality and that linearity had occurred. A statistically significant correlation was observed between the two variables [$r=0.767$, $n=50$, $p<.0005$].

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The present study sought to explore the extent to which Iranian EFL learners' self-perception or sense of worth and their communicative skills were related. Contrary to the null hypothesis, the results revealed a positive correlation between these two variables. It can be implied that the higher an individual's self-perception and assertiveness, the higher the level of communication will be. The participants, who were more willing to socialize, revealed greater creativity and compensation strategies as well as a willingness to seek further opportunities for improving speaking abilities. In other words, the ones who enjoyed working in teams and coming up with new ideas and solutions scored higher on both the Belbin's self-perception test and the oral communication test.

The results also proved that the students with higher self-perception turned out to be more self-directed. They exhibited a number of features without which academic success does not seem feasible. Lidner and Harris (1993) identified these features as:

1. **Epistemological beliefs:** a person's own understanding of their system of knowing. Knowing about this gives a person the ability to see where they fit into learning or how it influences them. It also influences confidence. The more the learner understands about a particular situation, the more success they will experience.
2. **Motivation:** The will to learn or get better at learning. In the case of the self-regulated learner, this motivation comes from recognizing the importance of the task at hand and through personal development.
3. **Meta-cognition:** Knowledge about cognition and awareness of one's own thinking and learning. This fits with the use of learning strategies. The student must know what tools they have and how well they use them. This creates a more active involvement on the part of the learner as they have to assess the situation based on their own abilities and use the learning skills that they see as appropriate or successful.
4. **Learning strategies:** Strategies the learner is aware of and how they utilize them.
5. **Contextual sensitivity:** The ability to understand a particular learning situation and how to identify the problem and solve it.
6. **Environmental utilization/control:** Use of external resources, personal experience, and knowledge to achieve solutions.

Therefore, with a higher level of emotional intelligence, students tend to become fully engaged in communicative tasks by setting goals, evaluating the situations, taking necessary steps and monitoring themselves regularly. In addition, they constantly evaluate their performance and seek information from external resources. The present research came to the conclusion that self-concept is particularly important for ESL learners because the opinion of any individual about his/her own character determines his/her social skills and, in particular, his/her oral communication. If an individual's self-imagination is positive and relatively well-balanced, the person is regarded as a successful speaker; conversely a person with an unbalanced and negative self-concept seems to encounter communication breakdowns and failures.

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