

# **SELF CONCEPT IN ENGLISH LEARNING**

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## **Abstract**

This paper is aimed at describing self concept in English learning. This will explore the concept of self concept and its importance for students in learning English. Self concept is one of way for students to creatively in learning English. As a foreign language, English is not easy to learning by the students at the beginning of the study. For them, English is likely to be one difficulty in learning. The basic skills in English is the ability that requires the process of communicative competence, pronunciation, intonation, grammar and vocabulary improving. For the beginner is difficult to try. Naturally, they feel confused on the rule, like: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Some of students are afraid to be active in English. This phenomenon makes many students have low scores in English. The lessons must be relaxed and comfortable. So, by their self concept, the students will feel confident, they will not need to try hard to learn language. It will just come naturally and easily.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Morley (1991), since English as international language has already become one of the compulsory subjects of both senior and junior high school and beside for elementary school. In many countries including in Indonesia, it cannot be denied again, that the importance of English has gained a lot of attention from many people all over the world. Unfortunately, there are so many factors as handicap of how people can master, for example many students' in their village to learning English is so very hard because some reasons, from teachers till facilities and also such as they never practice to speak English with their friends formally or informally, afraid of making mistakes, or afraid to be laughed at by others and do not feel confident, or sometime they seem do not have ideas in their mind if they are asked to practice their English.

Self concept is one of way for students to creatively in learning English. As a foreign language, English is not easy to learning by the students at the beginning of the study. For them, English is likely to be one difficulty in learning. The basic skills in English is the ability that requires the process of communicative competence, pronunciation, intonation, grammar and vocabulary improving. For the beginner is difficult to try. Naturally, they feel confused on the

rule, like: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency. Some of students are afraid to be active in English. This phenomenon makes many students have low scores in English. The lessons must be relaxed and comfortable. So, by their self concept the students will feel confident, they will not need to try hard to learn language. It will just come naturally and easily.

This paper is aimed at describing self concept in English learning. This will explore the concept of self concept and its importance for students in learning English.

## **SELF CONCEPT**

Self-concept may be defined as the totality of a complex, organized, and dynamic system of learned beliefs, attitudes and opinions that each person holds to be true about his or her personal existence. Self-concept is different from self-esteem (feelings of personal worth and level of satisfaction regarding one's self) or self-report (what a person is willing and able to disclose). Fromm (1956) was as beautifully clear as anyone when he described self-concept as "life being aware of itself."

The term self-concept is a general term used to refer to how someone thinks about, evaluates or perceives themselves. To be aware of oneself to have a concept of oneself. Baumeister (1999) provides the following *self-concept* definition: "the individual's belief about himself or herself, including the person's attributes and who and what the self is". Pastorino & Doyle-Portillo, (2013) "Self-concept is our perception or image of our abilities and our uniqueness. At first one's self-concept is very general and changeable. As we grow older, these self-perceptions become much more organized, detailed, and specific."

Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, (2012) "A self-concept is a collection of beliefs about one's own nature, unique qualities, and typical behavior. Your self-concept is your mental picture of yourself. It is a collection of self-perceptions. For example, a self-concept might include such beliefs as 'I am easygoing' or 'I am pretty' or 'I am hardworking.'" Crisp & Turner, (2007) "The individual self consists of attributes and personality traits that differentiate us from other individuals (for example, 'introverted'). The relational self is defined by our relationships with significant others (for example, 'sister'). Finally, the collective self reflects our membership in social groups (for example, 'British')."

Like many topics within psychology, a number of theorists have proposed different ways of thinking about self-concept.

According to a theory known as social identity theory, self-concept is composed of two key parts: personal identity and social identity. Our personal identity includes such things as personality traits and other characteristics that make each person unique. Social identity includes the groups we belong to including our community, religion, college, and other groups.

Bracken (1992) suggested that there are six specific domains related to self-concept:

- Social - the ability to interact with others
- Competence - ability to meet basic needs
- Affect - awareness of emotional states
- Physical - feelings about looks, health, physical condition, and overall appearance
- Academic - success or failure in school
- Family - how well one functions within the family unit

Humanist psychologist Carl Rogers believed that there were three different parts of self-concept:

1. Self-image, or how you see yourself. It is important to realize that self-image does not necessarily coincide with reality. People might have an inflated self-image and believe that they are better at things than they really are. Conversely, people are also prone to having negative self-images and perceive or exaggerate flaws or weaknesses. For example, a teenage boy might believe that he is clumsy and socially awkward when he is really quite charming and likeable. A teenage girl might believe that she is overweight, when she is really quite thin.

Each individual's self-image is probably a mix of different aspects including your physical characteristics, personality traits, and social roles.

2. Self-esteem, or how much you value yourself. A number of different factors can impact self-esteem, including how we compare ourselves to others and how others respond to us. When people respond positively to our behavior, we are more likely to develop positive self-esteem. When we compare ourselves to others and find ourselves lacking, it can have a negative impact on our self-esteem.
3. Ideals self, or how you wish you could be. In many cases, the way we see ourselves and how we would like to see ourselves do not quite match up.

The earliest milestone in the self-concept theory is that of Rene Descartes, who proposed that a person's existence depended on how he perceives so. Sigmund Freud, one of the most prominent psychologists, proposed many theories that talk about our internal mental processes. His theory holds that we have 3 main aspects within us, the id (pleasure-oriented), ego (balance between id and superego) and the superego (conscience-driven) which may influence the way we think of ourselves.

Psychologists Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow(1982),were the first to establish the notion of self-concept. According to Rogers, everyone strives to reach an "ideal self". Rogers also hypothesized that psychologically healthy people actively move away from roles created by others' expectations, and instead look within themselves for validation. On the other hand, neurotic people have "self-concepts that do not match their experiences...They are afraid to accept their own experiences as valid, so they distort them, either to protect themselves or to win approval from others."

The self-categorization theory developed by John Turner states that the self-concept consists of at least two "levels": a personal identity and a social one. In other words, one's self-evaluation relies on self-perceptions and how others perceive them. Self-concept can alternate rapidly between the personal and social identity. Children and adolescents begin integrating social identity into their own self-concept in elementary school by assessing their position among peers. By age 5, acceptance from peers has a significant impact on children's self-concept, affecting their behavior and academic success.

A milestone in human reflection about the non-physical inner self came in 1644, when Rene Descartes wrote Principles of Philosophy. Descartes proposed that doubt was a principal tool of disciplined inquiry, yet he could not doubt that he doubted. He reasoned that if he doubted, he was thinking, and therefore he must exist. Thus existence depended upon perception.

A second milestone in the development of self-concept theory was the writing of Sigmund Freud (1900) who gave us new understanding of the importance of internal mental processes. While Freud and many of his followers hesitated to make self-concept a primary psychological unit in their theories, Freud's daughter Anna (1946) gave central importance to ego development and self-interpretation.

Self-concept theory has always had a strong influence on the emerging profession of counseling. Prescott Lecky (1945) contributed the notion that self-consistency is a primary

motivating force in human behavior. Raimy (1948) introduced measures of self-concept in counseling interviews and argued that psychotherapy is basically a process of altering the ways that individuals see themselves.

By far the most influential and eloquent voice in self-concept theory was that of Carl Rogers (1947) who introduced an entire system of helping built around the importance of the self. In Rogers' view, the self is the central ingredient in human personality and personal adjustment. Rogers described the self as a social product, developing out of interpersonal relationships and striving for consistency. He maintained that there is a basic human need for positive regard both from others and from oneself. He also believed that in every person there is a tendency towards self-actualization and development so long as this is permitted and encouraged by an inviting environment (Purkey & Schmidt, 1987).

While most self-concept theorists continued to write and conduct research during the 1970's and 1980's, general interest in self-concept declined. In a recent article explaining the likely causes for the decline of "humanistic" education, Patterson (1987) presents reasons for the decline of interest in self-concept as well. He offers four likely causes:

1. A cornucopia of contrived games, gimmicks, and techniques that were introduced and controlled by unprepared professionals.
2. A national mood of "back to basics" in education prevailed where concern for the emotional needs of students was viewed as inimical to academic excellence.
3. Poor judgment by counselors and teachers in selecting suitable materials for values clarification programs resulted in public opposition to any attempt to introduce values in school.
4. Strong opposition by those who objected to any consideration of personal development of students because they believed it to be secular humanism and, therefore, an effort to undermine religion.

## **ASPECTS OF SELF-CONCEPT THEORY**

Richard (1999): 139–153, The self-concept theory holds many assumptions about our personal judgment towards our selves. Here are some of them:

### **1. Self-concept is learned.**

One of the very basic assumptions of this theory is that no person is born with a self-concept. Self-concept is believed to develop as a person grows old. This means that our perceptions towards our selves can be shaped and can be altered, and can also be affected by environmental factors. In this sense, self-concept is actually a product of socialization and development. A person may have a perception of himself different from what other people thinks of him. For example, an individual feels that he is generous while others see him as a selfish person.

## **2. Self-Concept is organized.**

A person may have numerous views of himself. He may think that he is kind, patient, loving and caring, or selfish, cruel, rude and stubborn. No matter how many different perceptions you have on yourself, still, there is one perception that facilitates all of these insights, causing one organized self-concept. When a person believes something that is congruent to his self-concept, it is more likely that he would resist changing that belief. He tends to stick to his present view of himself for quite a long time, and changing this perception of his self may take too long, but change is feasible.

### **1. Lastly, self-concept is dynamic.**

As a person faces different situations and new challenges in his life, his insight towards himself may constantly change depending on the way he responds to such life changes. We see things depending on our self-concept. We behave according to how we see ourselves in a situation. Therefore, self-concept is a continuous development wherein we tend to let go of the things and ideas that are not congruent to our self-concept, and we hold on to those that we think are helpful in building a more favorable perception of our personal existence.

Lewis (1990) suggests that development of a concept of self has two aspects:

#### **a. The Existential Self**

This is *the most basic part of the self-scheme or self-concept; the sense of being separate and distinct from others and the awareness of the constancy of the self*" (Bee, 1992).

The child realizes that they exist as a separate entity from others and that they continue to exist over time and space. According to Lewis awareness of the existential self begins as young as two to three months old and arises in part due to the relation the child has with the world. For

example, the child smiles and someone smiles back, or the child touches a mobile and sees it move.

### **b. The Categorical Self**

Having realized that he or she exists as a separate experiencing being, the child next becomes aware that he or she is also an object in the world. Just as other objects including people have properties that can be experienced (big, small, red, smooth and so on) so the child is becoming aware of him or herself as an object which can be experienced and which has properties. The self too can be put into categories such as age, gender, size or skill. Two of the first categories to be applied are age (“I am 3”) and gender (“I am a girl”). In early childhood, the categories children apply to themselves are very concrete (e.g. hair color, height and favorite things). Later, self-description also begins to include reference to internal psychological traits, comparative evaluations and to how others see them.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF SELF - CONCEPT IN LEARNING ENGLISH**

There have been empirical studies on factors that influence strategy use, and self-concept’s influence on learning achievements included in learning English. According to Ellis (1994), learning strategies are the bridges that connect individual difference and environmental factors and the study results. The individual differences and environmental factors will decide the choice of learning strategies. Based on it, self-concept, as one factor of individual differences, will influence the choice of learning strategies. In Ellis’s (1990) model of L2 acquisition, learning strategies play the mediating role between individual learner differences and learning outcomes. Individual learner differences (beliefs, affective states, general factors, and previous learning experiences) together with various situational factors determine the learners’ choice of learning strategies.

Self-concept has to do with a person’s perceptions and evaluations regarding himself or herself. It is a basic requirement for successful cognitive and affective activity. According to Marsh (1990), self-concept is formed through experience with and interpretations of environment. It develops when we are children and gradually learn to identify a self as distinct from others. As we incorporate beliefs, attitudes and memories, new experience and ideas will be affected by the previously existing notion of who we are and by our need to protect this fragile

self. In addition, an individual concept of self is especially influenced by evaluations from significant others, reinforcements, and attributions for one's behavior.

Among the factors that influence learners in language learning, learning strategies are important roles. According to Nunan (1991), one of the characteristics of the "good" language learner is an ability to reflect on and articulate the processes underlying their own learning. Effective learners are aware of the processes underlying their own learning and seek to use appropriate learning strategies to control their own learning (Jones et al., 1987). More effective learners differ from less effective ones in their use of strategies (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990). Students who are designated by their teachers as more effective learners use strategies more frequently, and use a greater variety of strategies than students who are designated as less effective.

Bialystok (1981b) found that Grade 10 and 12 learners of L2 French in Canada varied in the extent to which they believed that language learning involved formal as opposed to functional practice, and that this influenced their choice of strategies.

Wenden & Rubin (1987) also found that learners who emphasized the importance of learning tended to use cognitive strategies that helped them understand and remember specific items of language, while learners who emphasized the importance of using language employed few learning strategies, relying instead on communication strategies. Learners who stressed personal factors did not manifest any distinct pattern of strategy use.

Bialystok (1981) stated that aptitude was not as influential as learners' beliefs. However, it was possible that learners with enhanced decontextualized language skills (seen by Skehan (1989) as one aspect of aptitude) would be better able to talk about the strategies they used.

Leino (1982) pointed out that learners with high conceptual levels were better at describing their strategies than learners with low conceptual levels. It was possible, then, that learning strategies were related to that part of language aptitude shared with a general intelligence factor.

William and James (2002) pointed out that beginning readers' reported word identification strategies for identifying unfamiliar words in text were examined in relation to reading achievement, reading-related skills, and academic self-perceptions. Children who were participating in a three-year longitudinal study of reading acquisition in a whole language instructional context were placed in two groups according to their reported word identification strategies obtained towards the end of their first year of schooling. Results indicated that children



who reported using wordbased strategies showed superior reading and reading-related performance, and reported more positive self-efficacy beliefs in reading and more positive academic self-concepts than children who reported using text-based strategies. The results were discussed in terms of predictions stemming from the different theoretical assumptions about reading acquisition that underlie the code-emphasis and whole language approaches to beginning reading instruction.

Although many researchers from home and abroad have made a lot of research to find out that there are significant differences of using learning strategies between the good learners and losers of examination, the research about individual and environmental factors' influences on learning strategies is little. In China, some research found out that English self-concept can influence learning strategies. Xu Jin and Zhao Jingbo (2006) conducted a survey among 598 medical sophomores of a medical university by using the self-concept questionnaire and strategy inventory of language learning. The results showed that self-concept had significant correlation with language learning strategies. It was concluded that during the training of language learning strategies, importance should be attached to enhancing English self-concept level.

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