

Developing primary school students' foreign language learner self-concept

What this research was about and why it is important

The research looked at the role of self-efficacy beliefs and attributions in the emergence and development of foreign language learner self-concepts in young learners. Self-concept refers to a person's perception of themselves and is shaped by cognitive beliefs and affective responses. The concept of self-efficacy relates more specifically to one's perceived ability to do something successfully (or otherwise) and the factors to which a person attributes their successes or failures. The author stresses the need to distinguish between different kinds of self-concept (e.g., English or Maths self-concept) and to recognise that foreign language learner self-concepts emerge (or fail to emerge) within a complex web of interrelated factors. The focus of the study was a storytelling project, a school activity which the children were familiar with in their L1 and which was introduced as a focal activity in the foreign language classroom. The project incorporated reflection on the familiar (storytelling in L1) as a point of reference to explore foreign language learner self-concepts. The findings suggest that there are strong causal links between learner attributions (perceived successes and/or failures), self-efficacy levels, and emerging self-concepts. An important contribution of this paper is that it looks at aspects related to both learners and teachers and highlights pedagogical applications which could be applied in different contexts across the globe. Thus, it highlights the teachers' role in identifying children's beliefs in order to improve pedagogical practice and encourage children to develop positive and realistic self-concepts.

What the researcher did

- A total of 19 Catalan/Spanish-speaking children aged 10-12 from two intact groups in a small rural school took part in the study.
- Children completed questionnaires and other reflective tasks which were incorporated into class activities. They also took part in small group audio-recorded discussions that sought to capture their thoughts about foreign language learning at school; classes were also observed.
- The data collected was analysed qualitatively and quantitatively to identify and evaluate children's self-efficacy beliefs, as well as factors underpinning these beliefs. This analysis was subsequently extended to gain an understanding of how learner attributions were affecting emerging foreign language learner self-concepts.

What the researcher found

- There were considerable changes in self-efficacy throughout the period when the project took place.
- Low levels of self-efficacy were attributed to three main factors: perceived weaknesses in communication skills and comprehensibility; pronunciation and/or accent; and identity-related issues regarding competing languages.
- Data revealed the presence of foreign language anxiety among the children which led to avoidance behaviour.
- Some children believed that accent related issues are fixed/unchangeable and represent a permanent barrier to effective communication in a foreign language. They also revealed differences in the way they perceived L1 learning and foreign language learning: with the former being thought of as easy or effortless, while foreign language learning was associated with difficulties and barriers.
- Children showed awareness of the relation between language and identity to various degrees: one extreme expressing defensive feelings of their L1 identity which led to them refusing or resisting foreign language learning; while at the other end of the spectrum, some children saw foreign language learning as an opportunity for widening horizons and envisaging different possible future selves that included multiple language use.

Things to consider

- Children's self-efficacy levels differ between languages, with much lower levels for foreign languages than for L1 with respect to the same task (storytelling). This suggests that language skills – or children's perceptions of these skills - might not be automatically carried across languages.
- More support is needed to help teachers become more aware of the impact of learner self-efficacy beliefs, so that they can incorporate work on learner attributions in classroom activities.
- There is a need to identify and address children's debilitating beliefs in order to promote constructive attitudes to foreign language learning.
- It is important to encourage the setting of realistic and achievable goals.
- The author encourages colleagues to make use of her instruments and approach as a starting point to address underlying issues that may be hindering learners' progression.