



SELF-ESTEEM FOR TEACHERS AND LEARNERS

By Katie Head

Self-esteem is now being talked about a lot in relation to learning success. It has become a prominent topic on agendas at teachers' conferences, and as described by de Andrés in her contribution to Jane Arnold's recent book on *Affect in Language Learning*, it has attained topicality as a focus for action research. So, what exactly is self-esteem and what do we mean by it?

Here is the definition quoted by de Andrés (1999: 87):

"By self-esteem we refer to the evaluation which the individual makes and customarily maintains with regard to himself; it expresses an attitude of approval or disapproval, and indicates the extent to which an individual believes himself to be capable, significant, successful and worthy..." (Coopersmith 1967).

In other words, the concept of self-esteem embraces two fundamental questions about my existence as a person: what am I like, and what am I capable of achieving? We speak of people having high or low self-esteem as an ingrained characteristic; yet self-esteem can also be experienced as a changing feeling that waxes and wanes in relation to different situations or tasks, and that depends on how other people treat us, or how we feel about ourselves, at different times and in different ways.



Try recalling a time or times when your self-esteem has been high, and notice the feelings that enter your mind and your body as you do so. They were probably something like these:

- A pleasant physical sensation of warmth and relaxation.
- A sense of well-being and satisfaction.

- An absence of frustration and anxiety.
- A feeling of vitality, energy and power to cope with whatever life throws at you.
- The certainty that others are well-intentioned towards you, and that you are liked and respected.
- A sense that you are OK with yourself and therefore need not fear criticism and feedback.
- An openness to other people and a willingness to listen and share.

There is much evidence now to support the idea that self-esteem plays a significant role in successful learning. Learners who, to use Tony Humphreys' definition of self-esteem, are convinced of their own "lovability and capability" are not constrained by anxieties about what other people may think of them or about what they can achieve. As a result, they feel at ease in formal learning situations, enjoy working and undertake tasks with enthusiasm. Mistakes are turned to advantage as learning opportunities since learners with high self-esteem are not worried about giving wrong answers or appearing stupid in front of their classmates. In addition, they are capable of working independently and autonomously, and do not need constantly to seek approval from the teacher before moving on to new tasks. Because they are essentially secure and confident within themselves, they are not competitive in striving for success, but are open and friendly towards other members of the class and willing to share what they know. At the same time their ability to be assertive and purposeful enables them to make sure that they receive the attention and support they need from the teacher.

As every teacher instinctively knows, such learners are a joy to teach and their presence greatly enhances the group atmosphere. Why is this? One reason is that when we are with people who have high self-esteem we also tend to start feeling better about ourselves. Because people with high self-esteem have their own inner sense of well-being, they do not need to make uncomfortable demands or threaten the security of others. A happy, contented class will tend to develop into a hardworking and successful class. Perhaps you have had such a class recently; if so, spend a minute or two visualising yourself and the learners and consider whether you can explain this success in



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terms of self-esteem issues.

But what of the class that fails to 'gel' successfully, and the learners who struggle to make progress? While there are no easy answers or panaceas for the problem class or learner, the possibility that low self-esteem may lie at the roots of many learners' difficulties offers a direction worthy of serious consideration. Successive negative experiences, such as having your feelings or needs ignored, being put down or ridiculed at school, being unfavourably compared to a sibling or classmate, being over-protected or over-controlled, leave a legacy of self-doubt and poor self-image which often survives into adulthood.

One of the most common sources of self-esteem problems is 'conditionality'. This is the result of an upbringing in which value has been placed on the person's behaviour, rather than on the person himself or herself. In other words, I will love / respect / reward you IF YOU tidy your room / come home early / pass your exam / keep quiet / stay and help Maria with her homework ... , etc. Many people have been conditioned in this way by parents and teachers, to expect recognition on the basis of what they do rather than who they are. It leads to a dependency attitude in which they need constantly to seek praise and approval for their actions, and at the same time develop a deep inner fear of failure and rejection if they make a mistake or show themselves to be incompetent in any way. Learners with low self-esteem tend to become excessively shy and unconfident of their own ability to make decisions; or they turn into bullies and show-offs, demanding attention even if only to elicit the kind of rejection which reinforces their already negative self-perception.

Perhaps you can identify areas of your present life, either at work or elsewhere, in which you feel that your self-esteem is lower than you would like it to be. Where do you think those feelings come from? Can you make any links with an experience somewhere in your past?

As de Andrés (1999: 88) points out, teachers' responses "... serve as mirrors through which children see and judge their image. If a positive image is reflected, children will feel worthy of love and valued. On the contrary, if the image is negative, children will believe that they are rejected, unloved and unwanted, and they will act accordingly" Since a child's self-image is still being formed, it is particularly crucial for parents and teachers to project positive messages of love and regard for the person, even while criticising the behaviour.

But adults, too, can have their self-esteem dented and battered by negative experiences, especially when these

rattle an already shaky self-image. For example, have you felt unreasonably hurt recently by any of the following?

- Someone ignoring you or taking you for granted (especially someone you like or who is an important figure in your life).
- Someone putting you down or criticising you (especially in a situation where it was difficult or impossible to defend yourself).
- Not being consulted about changes to your working conditions.
- Being asked to do boring or repetitive work.
- Having a request to do a course, or to take time off, turned down without a satisfactory explanation.
- Making a mistake that you should not have made and would not normally make.
- Failing an exam or being turned down for a promotion.

We know that teacher beliefs and teacher expectations can turn into self-fulfilling prophecies in the classroom. Research has proved that teachers unwittingly give more time, attention and support to learners whom they expect to perform well in the classroom; in other words, to the very learners who already have high self-esteem. It is important that teachers acknowledge this to be so, and then do their best consciously to restore the balance of attention in their classes, not least because learner beliefs and expectations no doubt also turn into self-fulfilling prophecies in the classroom, and learners who do not expect to succeed will turn out to be the poorest performers.

Beyond this, what else can we, as teachers, do to nurture self-esteem among our learners? Here are some suggestions:

- Enhance your awareness of the learners as individuals by making a mental note of something about each one that is unique and positive. This can help to separate the person from the behaviour when you need to respond to a breakdown in classroom discipline or a poor record of work.
- Make an effort to get to know your learners as people, and let them get to know you. Learners tend to like teachers who they perceive as genuine, honest and interested in them. Guard against non-verbal behaviour which might be giving out different messages from these, as learners



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will be quick to pick up on any sign of incongruence in your behaviour towards them.

- Avoid using behaviours in class that damage self-esteem: criticism, sarcasm, ridicule, put-downs, comparing learners with each other, ignoring learners so that they feel invisible.
- Reward effort, not just performance. Highlight progress and make suggestions as to where further effort is needed. Let each learner know that you are noticing their personal effort and attainment and encouraging them to learn at their own pace.
- Make sure that those learners with low-esteem who need your attention and approval, receive it, for example, by giving them small tasks to do which help you.
- Make sure that everyone in the class knows and agrees to the system of responsible behaviour you are following (such as being on time for lessons, only speaking English in class, being quiet when other people are speaking, etc.). You may want to do this by negotiating the set of rules with the class. Be fair and consistent in handing out sanctions for irresponsible behaviour, and always give the learner a chance to explain and justify what they have done before you impose the sanction.
- Use 'personalised' language learning activities from time to time. Select especially those activities which encourage learners to focus on their own positive feelings and attributes, or which draw attention to their unique qualities and attainments in ways which enable the other learners in the class to discover and appreciate the rich variety of experience and creativity within the group.

And last but not least, work on your own self-esteem. Make sure you feel as good as you can about yourself. Remember, your self-esteem will 'rub off' onto the people around you, and a teacher with high self-esteem is more likely to encourage learners in the ways of learning that are conducive to raising self-esteem and enhancing performance.

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