



## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-ESTEEM AND READING COMPREHENSION OF EFL IRANIAN PRE-UNIVERSITY LEARNERS

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### ABSTRACT

*The present study was conducted to find out the relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL Iranian pre-university students. To fulfill the purpose of the study, 45 intermediate learners of six pre-university centers in Shahab, Hormozgan were chosen by means of administering a placement Test. Afterwards, a sample of reading section of PET test and the Coppersmith's questionnaire self-esteem inventory was administrated to the participants. The analysis of the results demonstrated a significant correlation between the main variables. It was found that there is a positive significant correlation between participants' self-esteem and their reading comprehension scores for the whole participants and for both genders though this correlation was stronger among female students. The findings of the study accentuated considering EFL students' self-esteem in teaching reading comprehension for having a successful reading class.*

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**Keywords:** Self-esteem, Language learning, Reading comprehension, EFL learners, Pre-university level, Iranian education system.

### Contribution/ Originality

The paper's primary contribution is in finding the relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL Iranian pre-university learners.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As suggested by Rivers (1981) "reading is the most important activity in any language class, not only as a source of information and a pleasurable activity but also as a means of consolidating and extending one's knowledge of the language" (p.259). It is not so difficult to realize the reason behind such statements. Many EFL learners including Iranians usually do not have the opportunity to converse with the native speakers of English as much as they need to read different materials in

English in different books, journals and websites. On the other hand, the field of second language learning and teaching has witnessed a major shift over the last twenty years with greater emphasis being put on learners and learning rather than on teachers and teaching (Kumaravadivelu, 1994; Richards, 2001). Learners' characteristics and individuality are met with more importance and individual variation is stressed extensively (Dornyei, 2012). As Swalander and Taube (2007) maintained, "good reading ability is the key to success in educational settings and this is why researchers try to find effective educational and psychological variables that can explain variations in reading ability and academic achievement" (p. 207). Among these affective factors, self-esteem is more dominant in human behavior and the other factors could easily be influenced by a lower or higher self-esteem. Research findings have found that about 50% of adolescents are at risk of engaging in different learning problems because of low self-esteem (Reasoner, 2004). This study tried to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL Iranian pre-university learners in Shahab, Hormozgan. So, the following hypotheses were presented:

1. There is no significant relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL Iranian pre-university students.
2. There is no significant difference between the relationship of self-esteem and reading comprehension in male and female EFL Iranian pre-university students.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Reading is a cognitive process which includes transferring the written symbols by the reader through the eyes, so these symbols need understanding meaning and then integrating this meaning into personal experiences. Therefore, there are some highly complex psychological processes concerned with reading (Ward and Skailand, 1983). Reading is sometimes referred to as a passive skill, but if we study the abilities that come into play in fluent direct reading with comprehension of meaning it is clear that readers are far from passive during this activity (Rivers, 1981). Accordingly, we may conclude that the ultimate purpose of reading is comprehension of the written passages or the understanding of the content of the written texts. Hedgcock and Ferris (2009) reflected on reading comprehension as a complex construct that involves the interaction of several psycholinguistic processes. It goes far beyond the ability to state the main idea of a text in one sentence, answer questions about details, define vocabulary, accurately read the text aloud, and so forth. Comprehension further involves the simultaneous and largely subconscious application of various types of background knowledge (schemata) and reading skills to particular texts.

Brown (2001) confirmed that "reading is as much an emotional as a cognitive process so that the affective factors strongly impact all phases of the writing process" (p.300). Hence, the lower standards of reading proficiency could be due to many various factors including cognitive or affective ones. In fact, reading is a combination of cognitive and affective processes and to optimize learning, equal attention should be given to the two sides; cognitive and affective. Learning English as a foreign language is one aspect of that broad process of learning. Therefore, not having a balance between those two domains, English learning process will be negatively affected. Andres (2002) argued that language learning is affected by both domains which are the mental and emotional sides of human behavior.

The affective domain includes emotions and psychological facets that learners hold about learning. No wonder, perceptions that the students bring to the learning situation have been recognized as a significant contributory factor to the learning process (Bernat, 2005). Those facets can be motivation, attitudes, anxiety or self-esteem. They can be positive or negative factors (Branden, 1994). In recent years, the importance of affective factors like anxiety, inhibition, motivation and self-esteem has been of interest in the field of language learning because of their high effects on learning a foreign or a second language (Andres, 2002). For this reason, researchers (Krashen, 1981; Dornyei, 2001; Khushaim, 2001; Andres, 2002) called upon reducing anxiety and inhibition and enhancing learner's motivation and self-esteem in the classroom context.

Self-esteem is considered as one of the important affective factors because success or failure of a person depends mostly on the degree of one's self-esteem. Stevick (1990) stated that success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analysis, and more on what goes on inside and between the people in the classroom. Indeed, success is not measured of how much one gains but of how satisfied he is with his work (Daniel and King, 1995; Grandin, 2002). Hence, a person should put a high value for his performance and be confident of his achievement because those judgments he makes are the drive for mastering proficiency (Stout, 2001). Moreover, Branden (1985) indicated that the biggest barrier to success is not lack of ability or talent but it is lack of self-esteem.

Learning English involves challenges and risk-taking; so to cope with them a learner needs to positively esteem him/herself. Around this issue, Brown (2007) maintained that "no successful activity can be occurred without some degree of self-esteem" (p.154). Further, Branden (1994) stated that "the value of self-esteem lies not in the fact that it allows us to feel better but because it allows us to live better, to respond to challenges and opportunities" (p.5).

Furthermore, as Dornyei (2005) suggested, self-esteem could be a manifestation of one's performance. Students who have good feeling about themselves have in their minds high goals to achieve whereas students with low self-esteem are likely to think about goals that are extremely low and would protect them from the anxiety of failure. According to the self-esteem model of Ross and Broh (2000) adolescents who feel good about themselves do better in school than do those who have low self-worth. If poor performance in academics can lead to a more negative view of oneself, then knowing this serves as an important motivator in measuring the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement (Osborne, 1995). Self-esteem has been determined to play a major role in learning outcomes and school influences the process of developing self-esteem (Pepi *et al.*, 2006).

In general, more successful academic accomplishments are coupled with higher self-esteem. Because there is such a strong, positive relationship and a continuous interaction between these two factors, studying them together can serve students, teachers, counselors and anyone working in the school environment in a beneficial manner (Freih, 2005). In fact, there are many studies that investigated the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievements and revealed a positive relationship between two variables (Byrne, 1987; Marsh, 1990; Hattie, 1992; Eccles, 1993; Schunk, 1999).

Low self-esteem can negatively affect language learning and they especially appear in oral communication (Nogueras and Rosa, 1997). Seyhan (2000) identified the impact of self-esteem, anxiety and motivation on the oral communicative ability of German and Japanese university students in California. By comparing the effects of those variables, the researcher found that self-esteem strongly affects oral communication. Moreover, in his study on Egyptian university students, Hassan (1992) investigated the relationship between self-esteem and oral communicative ability. It was found that self-esteem is related to EFL speaking ability. Kimura (2002) reached similar results when he investigated the relationship between affective factors (self-esteem, anxiety and risk-taking) and oral communicative tasks. Results revealed that successful learners tend to take risks but they do not show higher self-esteem than less successful ones

Accordingly, many researchers (Stevick, 1990; He, 1996; Khushaim, 2001) underlined the effect of teachers on building or harming student's self-esteem. Based on that, it is the EFL teacher's role to create a comfortable, relaxed and non-threatening environment and adopt different strategies to enable students to achieve well because the possibility to make mistakes in foreign language learning is greater and learners are exposed more to affective problems. It is the EFL teachers' responsibility to create a positive and supportive language learning environment. They can increase students' achievement through applying different strategies that make students express themselves freely, feel comfortable and believe that the teacher cares about them. In this regard, a warm-hearted interaction between teachers and learners, as well as among learners themselves would be the most essential factor in successful language learning (Finch, 2001).

Students can achieve well and do their best if they feel safe. This occurs when the teacher behaves modestly, be a good listener, cares about their participation and makes them feel they are worthy and efficient. What EFL teachers should believe in is that they can affect students' whole life and may change their future (Moskowitz, 1978). They should allow studentstotalkabouttheirinterests, feelings and do not consider this as deviation from the subject but it is to enrich the subject. The teacher should specify students' objectives in behavioral and measurable terms, and apply a variety of materials and teaching aids to the class for achieving these objectives. The teacher should foster student expectations about the reading and arouse their interest to read.

A number of studies suggested that boys and girls diverge in their primary source of self-esteem with girls being more influenced by relationships and boys being more influenced by objective success. For instance, Block and Robins (1993) discovered gender differences in self-esteem. They found that self-esteem was interpersonally oriented for adolescent girls, while for boys self-esteem was person-oriented. Thus, while self-esteem was related to the masculine trait of unique superiority for boys, high self-esteem was related to interconnectedness with others for adolescent girls. Butterfield (1999) demonstrated that there were statistically significant differences in self-esteem by gender on the academic competence scale, peer popularity scale, and personal security scale.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

#### 3.1. Participants

The participants in this study were 45 Iranian male and female pre-university students. They were studying at public pre-university centers in Shahab, Hormozgan, Iran. All the students at this level make the preparations to take part in the Entrance Examination for universities in Iran. Therefore, they were supposed to pursue their studies with high motivation and great enthusiasm. Their age ranged from 16 to 18 years. They all had studied English as a foreign language for 6 to 7 years, with the average of 2 to 4 hours a week, about 32 week a year.

#### 3.2. Instrumentation

To ensure the homogeneity of the English proficiency of the participants, a 60-item quick Placement Test was administered to a group of 139 pre-university students. The test results ranged between 6 and 37 out of 60. This shows that their English proficiency is low ranging between beginners to lower intermediate level of English language proficiency. Forty-five learners (21 male and 24 female) whose test results ranged between 25 and 37 were chosen to enter the final phase of the study. The reading comprehension test was the second major instrument that was used in this study. As the researcher was eager to use a reliable and valid test to measure the students' reading comprehension, he used a sample of PET proficiency test ([Cambridge English Preliminary Test Handbook for Teachers, 2004](#)) as the reading comprehension test of the study. PET tests cover the four main language skills – reading, writing, listening and speaking, using material from real life situations. The researcher used just reading section the PET exam which is relevant to the purpose of the research. As for measuring participants self-esteem, a sample of Coopersmith Self-Esteem Inventory which is a fifty-eight-item questionnaire intended to measure one's global self-esteem was used.

#### 3.3. Procedure

The purpose of the present study is to investigate the correlation between self-esteem and reading comprehension and the nature of this study is correlational. As a first step, to choose a group of homogeneous students, a sample of 60-item quick Placement Test (version 2) was administered to a group of 139 pre-university students studying at the Pre-university level in six pre university centers in Shahab County, Hormozgan. Those who gained scores between 25 and 37 were chosen to enter the final phase of the study as the main subjects of the study. From the whole population 21 male and 24 female pre university students met these necessary conditions. All the students attend a separate warm-up session prior to tests, i.e. the reading comprehension and self-esteem tests so that the philosophy behind the study can be explained to them. Before estimating their degree of self-esteem, students are given the tests of reading comprehension so that their English language reading comprehension scores could be determined. After the participants finished doing reading comprehension test and in the same session, they were asked to do the Coopersmith's questionnaire. Three of the students in the whole population of 45 ones turned out to fail this lie scale and subsequently they were removed from the rest of the research process. Then, the students' scores in the reading comprehension test and Coopersmith self-esteem inventory were

entered into SPSS program so that the Pearson correlation coefficient between self-esteem and English language reading comprehension scores of the learners could be conducted first for the whole sample and then separately for male and female learners.

### 3.4. Statistical Analysis

The analyses comprised of both descriptive and quantitative statistics. The descriptive statistics included frequencies, ranges, means and standard deviations and were presented for the whole population as well as for boys and girls separately. Normality of the data and conditions for analyses were checked statistically with Kolmogorov-Smirnov test. The Kolmogorov-Smirnov test was not meaningful for the Self-esteem Inventory and Reading Comprehension test scores which shows that the normality assumption was met. The statistical procedures included Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient to examine the degree and the direction of the relationship between the study variables.

## 4. RESULTS

Having gathered the required data and analyzed them, in this section gained results of the study were presented. Table 4.1 presents the descriptive information of the participants with regard to their gender.

**Table-1.** Participants' Gender

		<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>	<b>Valid Percent</b>	<b>Cumulative Percent</b>
Valid	Female	22	52.4	52.4	52.4
	Male	20	47.6	47.6	100.0
	Total	42	100.0	100.0	

Based on these illustrations, 52.4% of the participants are female and 48.6% are male. Although the girls are more in number, there is symmetry between the percentage of girls and boys in this study. Table 2 displays the descriptive statistics of the self-esteem and its subscales and reading comprehension scores for the whole population.

**Table-2.** Descriptive statistics of the study's variables for the whole population

	<b>N</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>Minimum</b>	<b>Maximum</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std. Deviation</b>
self-esteem	42	23	25	48	37.33	5.838
Reading Score	42	17	9	26	16.79	4.353
Valid N (list wise)	42					

Table 3 provides information regarding the descriptive statistics of the self-esteem and its subscales and reading comprehension scores for both genders separately.

**Table-3.** Descriptive statistics of the study’s variables for male and female participants

Gender		N	Range	Min.	Max.	Mean	S.D.
Female	self-esteem	22	22	25	47	36.27	6.720
	Reading Score	22	15	11	26	17.64	4.403
	Valid N (list wise)	22					
Male	self-esteem	20	18	30	48	38.50	4.571
	Reading Score	20	16	9	25	15.85	4.209
	Valid N (list wise)	20					

In this section of reviewing the results of the study, the correlation between the scores of self-esteem and reading comprehension scores is displayed. Table 4 reveals the results of the study regarding the correlation between students’ self-esteem and their reading comprehension scores for the whole participants.

**Table-4.** The correlation between self-esteem and reading score for the whole population

		self-esteem	Reading Score
self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.748**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	42	42
Reading Score	Pearson Correlation	.748**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	42	42

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

A quick look at Table 4 reveals that a positive correlation coefficient ( $r=0.748$ ,  $p<.001$ ) can be observed between participants’ self-esteem and their reading comprehension scores. Accordingly, with 99% confidence, we can safely claim that there exists a statistically significant positive correlation between two variables of self-esteem and reading comprehension for the whole population. Furthermore, the correlation coefficient gained in this study (0.748) is higher than the critical values of Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (0.393) with the assigned degree of freedom (40).

**Table-5.** The correlation between self-esteem and reading score for male and female participants

Gender			self-esteem	Reading Score
Female	self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.897**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	22	22
	Reading Score	Pearson Correlation	.897**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	22	22
Male	self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.721**
		Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
		N	20	20
	Reading Score	Pearson Correlation	.721**	1
		Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
		N	20	20

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

This also accentuates that there is a significant correlation between the variables of self-esteem and reading comprehension in whole population meaning that there is an association between the dependent and independent variables. When student's self-esteem increases his/her reading comprehension score increases and vice versa. Regarding this correlation in both genders, as table 5 reveals, a positive correlation coefficient ( $r=.721$ ,  $p<.001$ ) is demonstrated between male participants' self-esteem and their reading comprehension scores whereas a higher positive correlation coefficient ( $r=.897$ ,  $p<.001$ ) is displayed between female participants' self-esteem and their reading comprehension scores.

## 5. DISCUSSION

This study was to examine the relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL Iranian pre-university students. The analysis of the results demonstrated a significant correlation between variables of the study. It was found that there is a positive significant correlation between participants' self-esteem and their reading comprehension scores for the whole population. So the first null hypotheses of the study which stated that there is no relationship between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL Iranian pre-university students would be rejected because indisputably this correlation did exist This finding is in line with what [Swartz \(1972\)](#) found out while investigating the relationship between self-esteem and reading performance. The results in his study revealed that self-esteem positively correlated with reading. Moreover, the results of this study confirmed what [Sweet and Burbach \(1977\)](#) explored on the relationship between self-esteem and reading achievement of students. Their Findings revealed that reading comprehension was strongly affected by self-esteem. Decreases in self-esteem were followed by decreases in reading achievement. The Findings emphasized that the enhancement of self-esteem should be incorporated into the classroom environment. Furthermore, [Davies and Brember \(1999\)](#) measured self-esteem, reading and mathematical attainments of eight groups of students. Results showed that there was significant correlation between children's self-esteem and math and reading attainment scores. The outcome of the present study can also be interpreted in the light of different studies that emphasize the importance of self-esteem in the field language learning and teaching ([Hassan, 1992](#); [He, 1996](#); [Nogueras and Rosa, 1997](#); [Seyhan, 2000](#); [Kimura, 2002](#); [Hayati and Ostadian, 2008](#); [Khajavi and Ketabi, 2010](#); [Fahim and Khojasterad, 2011](#)).

As for the difference between self-esteem and reading comprehension of male and female EFL learners, the analysis of the results verified the difference between male and female students concerning the correlation between their self-esteem and reading comprehension scores when the correlation was higher in female students comparing to male students. Consequently, the second null hypotheses of the study which says that there is no difference between self-esteem and reading comprehension of male and female EFL Iranian pre-university students can be evidently rejected because there is a difference between self-esteem and reading comprehension of male and female learners. This finding is entirely expected because there are lots of research that supported the difference between male and female on self-esteem score ([Byrne, 1987](#); [Güngör, 1989](#); [Block and Robins, 1993](#)).



## 6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggested that there was a significant correlation between self-esteem and reading comprehension of EFL pre-university students. Based on the findings of this study, it can be implied that EFL teachers should not solely focus on teaching reading strategies to enhance students' comprehension. Though teaching reading strategies should be considered as a significant part of the teaching process, affective factors need teachers' attention as well. Self-esteem as an important affective factor which has a psychological impact on language students' learning requires special consideration. The teacher's role in building self-esteem is noticeably fundamental. EFL teachers must create a climate where students can develop their self-esteem, make them experience success and try to increase their self-confidence. While teaching reading comprehension and dealing with reading activities, EFL teachers should particularly create an atmosphere of friendliness and trust by listening to students, accepting their ideas/opinions, and if they have any problems, help them find solutions. In this way, students will feel relaxed, confident, assured, and not embarrassed. This behavior can definitely lower the students' affective filter (Krashen, 1984) which, in turn, may enhance learning. Overall, EFL teachers, school counselors and anyone in the school environment need to place the focus on the students and what seems to be most effective for them so that they could develop a suitable level of self-esteem.

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