

# On the Interplay of Self-Esteem, Proficiency Level, and Language Learning Strategies Among Iranian L2 Learners

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## Abstract

It is axiomatic that L2 teaching and learning is a process that requires dynamic involvement of L2 learners in the acquisition of knowledge and skills. L2 learners need to be assisted in setting individual learning goals. They should also be given the exposure to and guidance in effective language learning strategies (LLSs) in order to build a high level of confidence in the learning process. The study was an attempt to examine the relationship between LLSs and L2 learners' self-esteem. To achieve such objectives, a questionnaire was administered to 120 Persian L2 learners. The results revealed that LLSs had a strong correlation with self-esteem. Besides, the same strong, positive correlation was also observed between the participants' self-esteem and their L2 proficiency level. It was finally understood that of the L2 independent variables of the study (i.e., self-esteem and L2 proficiency level), it was the L2 participants' proficiency level that better accounted for their use of LLSs. Conducting studies like the present one may contribute effectively to the better teaching of an L2 to L2 learners.

*Keywords:* Language learning strategies (LLSs), Self-esteem, proficiency level, Iranian L2 learners

Language learning strategies (LLSs) are usually defined as “the conscious thoughts and actions that learners take in order to achieve a learning goal” (Chamot, 2004, p. 14). Through the frequent use of these strategies, they become automatic. However, L2 learners can muster them to conscious awareness (Chamot, 2005). This, as Littlejohn (2008) reports, demands L2 learners to develop some extent of meta-awareness that would enable them to think about their thinking, and then analyze any learning task and, finally, choose the appropriate strategy required to accomplish that task.

Accordingly, Byrnes (1996) states that LLSs are a set of actions undertaken to achieve the intended target. In this case, Byrnes divides LLSs into cognitive and cognitive-control strategies. A cognitive strategy involves cognitive information skills that will help L2 learners remember facts systematically, organize the facts or concepts into a clear, easy-to-understand structure, and integrate new knowledge on the basis of prior knowledge and daily experience. A cognitive-control strategy (i.e., metacognitive strategies) is the process of decision-making that determines which strategies should be used to achieve the goals, monitors the extent to which the implementation of strategies towards the objective are to be achieved, and reviews what steps have been used once the goals have been achieved.

Research on the use of LLSs (Park, 1997; Wharton, 2000) indicates that L2 learners, consciously or unconsciously, use a variety of LLSs. Successful L2 learners, however, use more effective and different LLSs than less successful ones.

LLSs and the factors affecting their use have received much attention in recent years because it has been commonly accepted that learning is a process, and the role of L2 teachers is to facilitate that process. Most L2 researchers who study L2s (Ellis, 1994; Nunan 1999; Oxford, 1990; Stern, 1983) view LLSs as a significant element that plays a salient role in

understanding the process behind learning an L2. While studying an L2 process, Ellis (1994) views LLSs as one of the basic elements in his work. Stern (1983) produces five groups of variables within the model of L2 learning: the social context, students' characteristics, climate learning, learning processes, and learning outcomes. He identifies LLSs as a mental operation that is very important in the learning process. Tarone (1980) and McLaughlin (1985) built an SLA model that involved three strategic factors: L2 learning, production, and communication. This information indicates that LLSs are an important domain and cannot be looked down from the field of SLA. In the context of today's world, education not only concentrates on the acquisition of knowledge and attaining a good grade in an examination, but also on increasing L2 learners' potential to direct their own learning and ability to overcome the challenges of the learning context. Today, L2 learners are responsible for their own learning. They are no longer seen as individuals who passively receive information; they are now also dynamically engaged in learning activities that facilitate the building of the relationship between the existing information and new knowledge.

Previous studies have shown that L2 learners who chose a positive approach to learning and used LLSs tended to have a great amount of learning experience. This finding suggests that L2 learners' tend to develop their own potential and learn at their own pace, not to mention their positive lifelong learning skills and knowledge (Artelt, 2003). According to Stipek (1996) and Brophy (1998), learning becomes more meaningful if L2 learners are aware of learning processes and actions. Therefore, they will be more responsible, more effective, and more independent in doing their tasks.

Further, LLSs play an important role in SLA, and this phenomenon has been highlighted and addressed by numerous writers and various studies (Cohen 2000, 2001; Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991; Oxford 1990). Some researchers argue that LLSs can foster L2 learners' autonomy in L2 learning (Holec, 1981) and assist in promoting L2 learners' own proficiency achievement (Bremner, 1999; Green & Oxford 1995; Oxford 1990). LLSs, therefore, not only help L2 learners become efficient in learning and using an L2, they also increase L2 learners' self-directed learning.

LLSs are not adequate to improve L2 learners' achievement, as Ellis (1994) argues. L2 learners should be motivated to use strategies and organize cognitions as well as their efforts (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). Motivation is the internal power that drives individuals to act in order to satisfy their desire (Armstrong, 1995). The internal power can be triggered either by the individual himself or herself or by the environment. In the context of learning and academic achievement, L2 learners should have a perspective about the capabilities, skills, and knowledge needed to complete the task of learning an L2. As such, individuals with high motivation and high self-efficacies will develop high goals (Wharton, 2000).

In addition, it has been conspicuous through different studies (e.g., Chastain, 1988; Rosenberg, 1965) that affective variables play a crucial role in L2 learning. However, in recent years, the importance of affective factors has become a matter of debate among L2 teachers, linguists, and researchers. Scads of studies have been achieved on this issue, most of which have approved that affective variables may not be ignored in L2 learning success or failure. The interest in affective variables in L2 learning in some modern teaching classes aim at reducing anxiety and inhibitions and enhancing L2 learners' motivation and self-esteem (De Andres, 2002).

Self-esteem can be simply defined as how we value ourselves. It is how we consider our value to the world around us, and how worthwhile we are to others. Self-esteem influences persons' trusts in others, their relationships, and their work. Positive self-esteem gives people the strength and flexibility to take charge of their lives and grow from their mistakes without the fear of being rejected. Positive self-esteem can be manifested through the syndromes such as optimism, good self-care, nonblaming behavior, and so on. At the other side of the coin is

low self-esteem that may be realized through signs like negative view of life, fear of being ridiculed, fear of taking any risk, and so on.

Self-esteem is one of the emotional variables accounted for by many researchers. Alexander (2001), the founder of self-esteem network in Britain, believes that self-esteem is a syndrome, as a set of indicators for mental well-being. The core of self-esteem is an unconditional appreciation of oneself, meaning an appreciation of both our negative and positive potentials in its fullest sense. An acceptance of this enables us to take responsibility for ourselves and become accountable for our actions. It also means that we can be more realistic about our achievements and shortcomings. Based on James (1890), it is the sum of our success divided by our pretensions, that is, what we think we ought to achieve. Therefore, self-esteem can be increased by achieving great success and maintained by avoiding failure. Then, James argues that raised self-esteem could also be achieved and maintained by adopting less ambitious goals. Self-esteem is, therefore, defined as being competence-oriented but also open to change. James (2002) also stated that high self-esteem is not only usually considered good for individuals who have it, but it is also good for societies as a whole. The belief is that high self-esteem can inoculate people, especially young people against vulnerability to a wide range of social ills. Rosenberg (1965) made another important feature to the concept of self-esteem by introducing the notion of "worthiness." Worthiness is whether a person judges him or herself as good or bad and, therefore, is an evaluative attitude towards oneself.

Forming attitudes about oneself is very complicated because it implies some kind of comparison with others, the forming of value judgments, and is rooted in a social-culture base. Coopersmith (1967) also provided a definition for self-esteem based on which self-esteem is the extent to which an individual believes himself or herself to be able, significant, successful, and worthy. This definition, in fact, is bringing together James' (1980) definition of self-esteem as competence-base and Rosenberg's (1965) definition as an evaluation of oneself. Coopersmith, moreover, added the point that self-esteem is important to a person's identity and awareness, and that high and low self-esteem would influence a behavior in positive and negative ways, respectively.

Chastain (1988) also maintains that of all L2 learners' variables used for learning an L2 the most influential are those related to L2 learners' emotions, attitudes, and personalities. He further continues that the affective domain plays a larger role in developing L2 skills than the cognitive domain because emotions control the will to activate or shut down the cognitive functions. He believes that if L2 learners are not willing to learn, they either will not learn much, or they will not use their maximum capacity to perform well. Moskowitz (1978) states that there is a relationship between humanistic education and concern for personal development, self-acceptance, and acceptance by others. He actually highlights the important role of making L2 learners more human. Moreover, based on humanistic education, learning is affected by how L2 learners feel about themselves. It is concerned with educating the whole person in all aspects, including the intellectual and emotional dimensions.

Research has shown that L2 learners who feel good about themselves are more likely to succeed. Holly (1987), for example, compiled a summary of many studies and pointed out that most of these studies indicated that self-esteem was the result rather than the cause of academic achievement. In addition, Hyde (1979) studied the effects of different levels of self-esteem on the performance of an oral production task by American college L2 learners learning French as an L2. She found that the different levels of self-esteem correlated positively with performance of oral production measures. The results of studies done by Watkins et al. (1991) also showed that self-esteem appeared to be an important variable in SLA.

Elmer (2001), in an overview of the current research on the impact of self-esteem on social and personal problems, noted that young people who have very low self-esteem are more likely to show signs of depression. They have, Elmer continued, suicidal thoughts and fail to respond to social influence. If a problem is not biological by itself, then it will almost always be traceable to poor self-esteem (White, 2002).

Based upon the above literature, the following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. Is there any significant relationship between self-esteem and L2 learners' LLS use?
2. Is there any significant relationship between self-esteem and L2 learners' proficiency level?
3. Which of the independent variables of the study (i.e., self-esteem and proficiency level) is a better predictor of L2 learners' LLS use?

Although multitudes of studies have been conducted considering the variable of self-esteem, very few have investigated its role with regard to LLSs. Consequently, the results of the current study can help both L2 teachers and learners to pay attention to the effect of self-esteem on language learning, especially on LLSs, and their use by L2 learners. Besides, as Brown (2000) rightly points out, learning strategy use is very susceptible and is likely to be affected by affective variables including self-esteem. Moreover, regarding LLSs, despite the preponderance of research on LLSs within English in an ESL context, there is an apparent paucity of this type of research within an EFL context like Iran (i.e., the present study's context). All in all, it can be claimed that doing studies on these issues and finding out the relationship that each of them may have with linguistic and cognitive features can add valuable findings to the body of knowledge on better and more effective teaching and learning of an L2.

## Methodology

### Participants

Altogether, 120 Iranian L2 learners took part in the study. They were both male and female L2 learners and were taking courses in a language school in Shahrekord, Iran. The participants, aged from 19 to 33, were divided into three beginning, intermediate, and advanced level groups based on their mean scores in consonance with the Oxford Placement test (OPT) given to them. After giving the test, it turned out that 42 of the participants were placed in the low (with the mean group of 25 and less), 48 in the intermediate (with the mean group of 25 to 60), and, finally, 30 in the advanced level proficiency groups (with the mean group of 60 and more).

### Materials

Three types of materials (i.e., the Oxford Placement Test [OPT], a LLS questionnaire, and a self-esteem questionnaire) were utilized to gather the required data.

To measure students' level of English proficiency, the OPT (Allan, 2004) was administered. The test involved 50 multiple-choice format items on reading, vocabulary, and grammar. The main reason why OPT was chosen is that it is objective, reliable as well as easy to administer.

As to the LLS questionnaire, it consisted of two sections: The first section pertained to demographic information of the participants (e.g., name, age, gender, etc.), and the second section involved 64 items on their LLSs. The items of the questionnaire were in the 4-point Likert format: 1 (*never*), 2 (*rarely*), 3 (*occasionally*), and 4 (*often*). This questionnaire was piloted on smaller group of L2 learners ( $n = 30$ ), exclusive of the main participants but similar to them. The reliability of the test turned out to be 0.73 using Cronbach's alpha

formula. In order to check its content validity, the test was examined by four professors and was confirmed to be valid for the present study purpose.

Regarding the second instrument, the self-esteem questionnaire, it was developed by Coopersmith (1967) and consisted of 58 items, all of which measured the degree to which the participants felt self-esteem during the class. One point with regard to the questionnaire is that eight items of the questionnaire (items 6, 13, 20, 27, 34, 41, 48, and 55) played the role of “filter” in order to ensure that the participants would respond to the items with sufficient consideration. Therefore, removing these filters, the rest of the 50 items were divided into four types of self-esteem: whole self-esteem, social self-esteem, family self-esteem, and lastly, academic self-esteem. This questionnaire was also pretested on the same 30 abovementioned participants. The Cronbach’s alpha formula revealed that its reliability was almost 0.86. Like the first instrument, the questionnaire was also checked and confirmed by experts for its validity.

### **Procedure**

At the beginning of the study, the reading comprehension placement test was administered to the participants. The purpose of this test was to divide the participants into three low, intermediate, and advanced proficiency groups in terms of their reading proficiency level. To do so, the mean and standard deviation of the gained scores, which ranged from 6 to 40 out of 40, were calculated. Those who scored more than one standard deviation above the mean were placed into the advanced level group. Those who scored between one standard deviation below and above the mean were considered in the intermediate level group, and finally, those whose scores were one standard deviation below the mean were placed into the low level group.

In the next stage of the study, the LLS questionnaire was distributed among the participants, and they were asked to respond to the items. They were informed that there was no time limitation, so that they would read the items carefully; hence, the reliability of their responses would increase.

Finally, in the last stage of the study, four days after giving the placement test and two days after giving the LLS questionnaire, the self-esteem questionnaire was distributed among the same participants to fill it in. The point with regard to the questionnaire is that the participants’ responses to each item were scored dichotomously as either zero or one. To be more detailed, for items 14, 18, 19, 23, 24, 28, 29, 31, 30, 32, 36, 45, 47, 57, 2, 4, 5, and 10 the YES responses received one, and the NO responses received zero. For the other items the reverse process was applied. That is, for the NO responses of the participants, one point and for the YES responses zero was assigned. Therefore, it is obvious that the maximum and the minimum score a person may have obtained was 50 and 0, respectively. On the whole, each of the participants came up with two scores: one for the reading test and the other for the self-esteem questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis**

Having gathered the data, the researchers used the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS, version 16) in order to run two correlations and one multiple regression. The purpose of running these two methods of analyses was to ascertain whether, first, there was any relationship between self-esteem and the LLS use of the participants and also between self-esteem and the proficiency level of the participants, and second, which of the independent variables of the study accounted for the participants’ strategy use more efficiently.

## Results and Discussion

### The Interrelationship of Self-Esteem and LLS Use

As with the first research question of the study which sought the presence or lack of any correlation between the participants' degree of self-esteem and their LLS use, Table 1 reflects the correlation statistics between the variables:

Table 1. *Correlation of Self-Esteem and LLS*

		Self-Esteem	LLS
Self-Esteem	Pearson Correlation	1	.788*
	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)		.000
	<i>N</i>	120	120
LLSs	Pearson Correlation	.788**	1
	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)	.000	
	<i>N</i>	120	120

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

As Table 1 reveals, firstly, there is a strong positive relationship between the two mentioned variables ( $r = .78$ ). Secondly, a significant difference is observed between the participants' self-esteem and their LLS use ( $p = .00 < .5$ ). It indicates that L2 learners with high self-esteem are more successful in using the efficient LLSs and vice versa.

Though almost no previous study has specifically dealt with the interrelationship between the two aforementioned variables, some scholars have dealt with self-esteem with regard to other factors. As an example, Chastain's (1988) study is among studies which point out that among all the variables affecting the performance of L2 learners' affective variables, self-esteem is more important than other factors like cognitive factors. Gee (1999) also reported an important relationship between affect and reading. Finally, Stevick (1976) also found out that creating some sense of positive attitudes in L2 learners is L2 teachers' first and foremost priority.

### The Interplay of Self-Esteem and Proficiency Level

Regarding the second research question of the study that was about the correlation between the other independent variable of the study, that is, proficiency level and the participants' self-esteem, Table 2 provides the answer to this question:

Tables 2. *Correlation of Self-Esteem and Proficiency Level*

		Proficiency Level	Self-Esteem
Proficiency Level	Pearson Correlation	1	.89
	<i>Sig.</i> (2-tailed)		.01
	<i>N</i>	120	120

Self-esteem	Pearson Correlation	.89	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.01	
	N	120	120

As shown in Table 2, first, there is a strong positive relationship between the participants' self-esteem and their LLS use, that is, the higher the level of L2 learners' self-esteem, the higher their proficiency level ( $r = .89$ ). To clarify the finding, it is apparent that as the proficiency level of a person increases, that person will be more confident in using the L2. There are also some studies confirming this finding. Holly (1987), for example, concluded that self-esteem is the result rather than the cause of academic achievement. In addition, Hyde (1979) also approved the abovementioned conclusion by asserting that different levels of self-esteem correlated positively with the performance of oral production measures. Watkins et al. (1991) also reported the high importance of self-esteem in SLA.

### The Predictability of Self-Esteem and Proficiency Level on LLS Use

Having supported the existence of a correlation between each of the independent variables (i.e., self-esteem and proficiency level) and the dependent variable of the study (i.e., LLS use), it is time to see which of the independent variables had more potential to predict the use LLSs on the part of the participants. With regard to this question, Table 3 shows the model summary findings of regression for it:

Table 3. Model Summary of the Variables

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.915	.75	-.70	1.72

As Table 3 indicated, 75% the variance in the participants' use of LLSs is explained by the combination of the two independent variables, namely self-esteem and proficiency level ( $R^2 = .75$ ). Besides, to see whether the coefficient of the regression demonstrated by  $R^2$  was significant or not, Table 4 is given below:

Table 4. ANOVA Results of Self-Esteem and Proficiency Level Related to LLS Use

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
1	Regression	97.0	2	48.5	.513	.001
	Residual	7191.5	76	94.6		
	Total	7288.5	78			

Table 4 demonstrates that the coefficient reported by  $R^2$  is significant ( $Sig. = .001$ ). Now to pinpoint which independent variable was a better predictor of writing performance, Table 5 needs to be examined:

Table 5. Coefficients of Self-Esteem and Proficiency Level

Model	Unstandardized Coefficients	Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
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		<i>B</i>	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	74.566	8.207		9.085	.000
	Proficiency Level	.053	.136	.47	.390	.02
	Self-Esteem	.103	.102	.21	-1.010	.04

Table 5 indicates that of the two independent variables, it was proficiency level that was a better predictor of the use of the participants' LLSs. In other words, by examining the Beta value reported in Table 5, it can be inferred that with regard to proficiency level, one standard deviation unit change in the score for motivation lead to .47 unit of change in the LLS use. As to the self-esteem variable, this unit of change was .21. Therefore, proficiency level can better predict the participants' LLS use.

### Conclusion

First, the study aimed at shedding some light on the issue if there was any relationship between the L2 learners' self-esteem and their LLS use. Second, it explored whether or not there was a correlation between the participants' self-esteem and their proficiency level. Finally, the study was an attempt to ascertain which of the two variables of self-esteem or proficiency level was a better predictor of L2 learners' LLS use. All in all, the study revealed the following:

- There is a strong positive interrelationship between the degree of L2 learners' self-esteem and their success in employing effective LLSs.
- There is a strong positive relationship between L2 learners' self-esteem and their proficiency level. In other words, the higher the proficiency levels of L2 learners, the higher their degree of self-esteem and vice versa.
- And finally, the proficiency level of L2 learners is a better predictor of their LLS use than their self-esteem degree.
- The present study may offer the following pedagogical implications:
- Amid different aspects to be considered while teaching and learning a language, language learning strategies play a significant role. Therefore, language teachers and language learners need to pay special attention to this aspect of language.
- There is a relationship between self-esteem and LLS use. When a student enjoys a high level of self-esteem and recognizes his/her abilities, he/she employs much more telling learning strategies. Therefore, teachers, noticing such a fact, should do their best to enhance the degree of self-esteem in their students.
- Finally, the proficiency level of language learners is a significant factor in teaching a language. In other words, language teachers should consider the point whether the proficiency of language learners is adequate to teach different LLS. In other words, they should keep in mind that not all LLSs are adequate for every level of proficiency.

Like any other study, the current study suffers from some limitations. The first limitation, and maybe the most noticeable one, can be ascribed to the participants of the study. In other words, in order to gain much more reliable information and findings about the variables of the study, other studies should be carried out with more participants in different contexts. Secondly, this study focused just on the participants' LLS use. Therefore, more studies need to be carried out with regard to other L2 aspects like learning styles, so that more comprehensive conclusions and findings could be made with regard to the role of self-esteem and proficiency level in L2 learning.



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