

# **English Proficiency as a Contingency of Self-Worth among Japanese University Students**

**By R. A. Brown**

## **Abstract**

Studies of the factors that conduce to successful foreign language learning outcomes have generally focused on the motivational categories first posited by Gardner and Lambert (1972), and more recent additions to the motivational menu (Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004). Human potential and self-growth motivations have been relatively neglected. Yet it is obvious that people do things for a wide variety of reasons and self-esteem enhancement may be one of them. The present research investigated the hypothesis that students whose sense of self-worth was more highly invested in their proficiency in English would devote more time and effort to learning English. In two studies, a sample of 83 Japanese college students completed a modified form of the academic subscale of the Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale, several widely used measures of global self-esteem, and several measures of learning effort. Female students were found to be more motivated by self-esteem enhancement than males, but participants' sense of self-worth was not significantly associated with their study effort. Possible reasons for this finding and future directions are discussed.

Japanese university students learn English for many reasons (Brown, 2004). Researchers have tended to focus on motivations for learning languages. Gardner (2006) emphasizes that motivations are not the same as reasons. Reasons are merely components of motivations. But reasons have been relatively neglected, perhaps being too banal, or perhaps too obvious. To some degree there is a considerable overlap between reasons and orientations, which are subcomponents of motivation in the Gardnerian socio-educational model (Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004). An integrative orientation is one aspect of integrativeness, which is an "...openness to take on characteristics of another cultural/linguistic group (Gardner, 2006, p. 247), rather than, as is sometimes thought, a desire to become a member of the target group. "Openness" may facilitate learning a foreign language (FL), but clearly it is not a "reason" for learning it. Instrumentality refers to utilitarian benefits gained from having learned the language. (Note that if openness were instead a positive urge to be similar to or accepted by the target group, then successful learning could well be viewed as instrumental in that it provided the means whereby a valued goal was accomplished.) Students may also have personal psychological reasons for learning English. Beebe (2001) describes students who want to learn English in order to avoid being "stereotypical Japanese boys and girls." One might describe this as "identity management." Many students claim to be learning English in order to "broaden their views" (Brown, 2004). One could view this in terms of either identity or utility. Another personal reason is self-esteem enhancement. In view of the

great importance attached to self-esteem (at least in North America), it is surprising that this potentially powerful motivation has been overlooked in foreign language learning studies. Simply put, being proficient at English makes some individuals feel good about themselves, while conversely, being poor at English makes them feel bad about themselves (Fukuchi, 2005; Fukuchi & Sakamoto, 2005). For students for whom this is the case, the amount of effort expended in the pursuit of proficiency might be related to the degree to which their self-esteem is invested in the domain of English proficiency.

It is rarely doubted that feeling good about oneself and having a positive self-view (together known as “self-esteem”) is a basic and universal human motivation (Blascovitch & Tomaka, 1991; Zhang & Baumeister, 2006). Self-esteem has been assessed in a number of ways, most commonly by asking people how they feel and what they think about themselves, using standardized questionnaires (the most widely used being the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale), or to rate themselves relative to other people on characteristics that are, or are assumed to be, important to them (Beck, Steer, Epstein, & Brown, 1990; Tafarofi & Swann, 1995). However, people may view themselves positively for a variety of reasons. Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, and Bouvrette (2003) describe these as “contingencies of self-esteem.” The essential idea is that people’s self-esteem is sensitive to how well they perform in domains that are important to them. Their self-esteem will be high if they perform well, and low if they perform poorly, in personally important domains. However, their self-esteem will be minimally affected by their performance in activities that their self-esteem is not contingent on. Thus, contingent self-esteem has motivational consequences. That is, because people like to feel good about themselves, they will do things that make them feel good and avoid doing things that make them feel bad. Similarly, because people do not like to feel bad about themselves, they may attempt to restore damaged self-esteem as the result, for example, of poor performance, by (among other tactics) expending greater effort towards achieving successful outcomes, or by revising their contingencies, that is, by denying the relevance of the activity or domain for their self-esteem

The present research investigated the hypothesis that individuals whose self-esteem is more invested in the domain of English Language proficiency will expend greater efforts toward achieving English proficiency.

## **Study 1**

### **Method**

#### *Participants*

Participants were 83 students (37 males, 46 females) enrolled in compulsory and elective English classes at a selective private university in Tokyo. Classes met once a week for two consecutive terms. The male and females students did not differ in age. Mean age was 19.4 ( $SD = 1.5$ ).

#### *Instruments and Procedure*

Assessment: Effort was operationalized as self-reported time spent studying or otherwise engaged in activities that the individual believed would yield increments in English proficiency. Participants were asked to maintain a detailed log of their outside of class English learning activities over a 28 day period, during the summer break. Participants were free to record any activity that they believed contributed to proficiency, and were additionally asked to describe the activity and record how many minutes they spent on it each day.. Self-

esteem was not directly assessed. Rather what was assessed was the degree to which self-esteem is invested in English proficiency. This was assessed with the five items comprising the academic competence factor in Crocker's domains model. The items were revised to specifically reflect the situational and cultural context, as suggested by Crocker (personal communication, June 2006), and were augmented by four related items designed to increase reliability (Appendix 1). Sample items were *Being good at English gives me a sense of self-respect* and *I feel bad about myself when I can't speak English well.* (reverse coded). Responses were made on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*definitely disagree*) to 5 (*definitely agree*). Finally, participants were invited to write a comment about the meaning of learning English for them personally.

## Results

The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale (CSWS) had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .74, which is adequate for present purposes (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994). The female mean for the CSW was 3.72 ( $SD = 0.47$ ), which was significantly higher than the male mean of 3.3 ( $SD = 0.69$ ),  $t(81) = 3.39$ ,  $p < .01$ . Both means were significantly higher than the scale midpoint at  $p < .05$  (males) and  $p < .0001$  (females), indicating that proficiency in English is important to the self-esteem of both males and females, but especially so for the females. Forty-nine students choose to write comments about the meaning of English for their sense of self-worth. Whether or not the participant wrote a comment correlated significantly with the participant's total CSW score for the males,  $r(37) = .44$ ,  $p < .01$ , but not for the females. The females were more likely to undertake the extra credit assignment. Twenty of 46 female students did, approximately an even split between those who did and those who did not (Binomial  $p = .46$ ). Among the males those who did not (29 of 37) outnumbered those who did (Binomial  $p = .001$ ). There was no difference in CSW for the students who took elective classes versus those who took compulsory classes,  $t(81) = 1.17$ , *ns*, consistent with previous findings that student motivations for learning English do not hinge on whether they are studying voluntarily or not (Brown, 2004). Total time spent studying English out of class during the summer break was treated categorically, as a few students logged an extreme number of hours, which would make the results of a parametric test highly misleading. A median split was performed and the higher scoring half in terms of time spent studying or using English was compared, via an independent-samples  $t$  test ( $p < .05$ ), to the lower scoring half with respect to their CSW scores. Participants whose self-esteem was more contingent on English proficiency did *not* invest more time enhancing their English abilities,  $t(26) = 0.67$ , *ns*. Or to phrase it in a more optimistic way, those whose self-esteem depended less on English proficiency studied just as much as those whose self-esteem depended more on English proficiency. Only 34% (28) of the 83 participants chose to record and report their autonomous learning activities in exchange for extra course credit. It would seem that being willing to make the effort to record one's study behavior might itself be an expression of motivation. However, CSW did not predict such willingness,  $t(81) = 1.17$ , *ns*. Obviously, data on what the non-reporting students did to enhance their self-esteem via greater English proficiency is unavailable.

## Discussion

The data suggest that while English proficiency is important to the self-esteem of some Japanese

university students, it is not directly related to motivation. However, it is entirely likely that at least part of these results stems from the fact that virtually all of the students scored high in CSW. For example, 78% of the students scored above 3.0, indicating that to some degree their self-esteem is contingent on English proficiency. Interestingly, English appears to be more impactful for the females than the males--89% of the females had CSW scores above 3.0, while only 65% of the males did. However, there were too few students, in this group, with low CSW scores to permit meaningful analysis of the motivational consequences of self-esteem that is contingent on English proficiency. Thus the results must be considered merely preliminary to a future larger scale survey.

## Study 2

A second study was undertaken to confirm the reliability of the obtained results and to ascertain whether English as a CSW is related to global self-esteem and to self-aggrandizement.

## Method

### *Participants and Instrument*

A subset of the original participants ( $n = 66$ , 25 males and 41 females) completed the CSW scale and several additional measures, specifically the Tatarodi and Swann (1995) Self-Liking/Self-Competence (SL/SC) scale, and one measure modeled after the Pelham and Swann (1989) Self-Attributes Questionnaire (SAQ). The SL/SC scale consists of two subscales, one assessing global self-esteem deriving from general perceptions of oneself as a competent individual, the other from perceptions of oneself as a likeable, good person apart from one's abilities or accomplishments. The same 5-point response scale, as described in Study 1, was used. Participants also evaluated themselves on the five SAQ attributes, and two others, one of which was "English ability." Participants evaluated themselves on a 7-point scale ranging from 1 (*much below average*) to 7 (*much above average*), with the middle scale step explicitly labeled "average" (*heikin*). As the study spanned the 2006 Christmas break, participants were asked to record their self-study activities, as in Study 1, with the difference that the relevant time period was not circumscribed apart from taking place during the Christmas break. Participation was voluntary but one point of extra credit was offered. All students in attendance on that day chose to participate. However, one female student responded to *every* item with the *mattaku atehamaranai* (absolutely doesn't apply to me) option and wrote "I don't know about myself or other people." Her data were not analyzed.<sup>1)</sup>

## Results

The CSW scale had a Cronbach's  $\alpha$  of .80 (males .85, females .71). The female mean score of 3.80 ( $SD = 0.46$ ) was significantly higher than the male mean score of 3.48 ( $SD = 0.65$ ),  $t(64) = 2.37$ ,  $p < .05$ . Both male and female means exceeded the scale midpoint, at  $p < .0001$ . However, CSW was not correlated with SL/SC or either subscale for either males or females nor with any of the SAQ dimensions, including English ability. Students who chose to complete the CSW in exchange for one point of extra credit ( $n = 66$ ), significantly

outnumbered those did not ( $n = 33$ ),  $\chi^2(1,99) = 13.15, p < .001$ . Of the 66 students (25 males, 41 females) who agreed to complete both parts of the survey, only 46 (18 males, 28 females) actually did complete both parts. Willingness to complete the questionnaire and report self-study itself may be an expression of motivation: Attendance among those who did was significantly better (23.1 of 26 possible class days) than among those who did not (10.8 of 26 days),  $\chi^2(1,99) = 11/00, p < .001$ . Of those who completed both parts, attendance was not significantly better ( $p < .05$ ) better among the males than females. The mean number of days of attendance was 23.1 (out of 26),  $SD = 3.30$ . Among students who agreed to complete both parts, the females were not significantly more likely to actually do it,  $\chi^2(1,66) = 0.00, ns$ . CSW was not significantly associated with attendance or numbers of self-reported study hours. There was a slight tendency for attendance to be associated with SAQ-Eng,  $r(66) = .23, p < .06$ . Among those who agreed to do both but did not do the second part, CSW scores did not differ,  $t(64), 1.25, ns$ . However, attendance was better among those who did both,  $t(64) = 2.95, p < .01$ . CSW was unrelated to SL/SC or any of the SAQ domain.. Correlations between CSW and SL/SC and both subscales were non-significant, as was the correlation between CSW and SAQ\_Eng.

## Discussion

The means reported above indicate that English proficiency contributes to some students' sense of self-worth. Indeed, only 9% had CSW scores below the midpoint (albeit substantially fewer females, 2%, than males, 20%). Thus, 98% of the female students, and 80% of the male students claimed that English contributed to some degree to their personal sense of self-value. The rather small standard deviations indicate that this relationship is widely distributed among students who voluntarily undertake autonomous learning. Interestingly, English proficiency-based self-esteem seems not to be related to either dimension of global self-esteem assessed by the Tafarodi and Swann (1995) SL/SC scale or to self-aggrandizement in the form of "better than average" self-evaluations, and specifically in the realm of English proficiency. Being good at English is important to some students' self-esteem, but they are not motivated to enhance their self-esteem by exaggerating their own abilities relative to their classmates. Thus they are relatively resistant to the sorts of cognitive illusions that are widespread in North American college student (and other) populations.

## General Discussion and Concluding Comments

An overwhelming majority of participants claimed that English ability was important to their sense of self-worth. However, this component of self-esteem was unrelated to global self-esteem, as assessed by two widely used instruments, the Rosenberg global self-esteem (GSE) scale and the Tafarodi and Swann SL/SC scale. This may be due to the possibility, as some have argued (Brown, 2005), that some Western psychometric instruments may not faithfully measure the affective side of Japanese self-concepts, or that Japanese simply do not have salient situation-independent self-concepts (Cousins, 1989). Japanese college students might feel good about themselves as the result of being good at English, while not feeling good about themselves apart from their competencies or successes in particular domains.

A variable that probably moderates the impact on the motivational impetus of self-esteem contingencies is the individual's achievement orientation, specifically whether the psychological and material rewards of

success are greater than the pain and other costs associated with failure (Woodrow, 2006). But success-seeking and failure-avoidance are conceptually independent. Feeling good about oneself as the result of success in a given domain does not logically entail feeling bad about oneself as the result of failure in that same domain. Asian people appear to be more strongly motivated to avoid aversive outcomes and conditions (Elliot, Chirkov, Kim, & Sheldon, 2001), relative to North Americans, who are more strongly motivated to seek reinforcing outcomes and conditions. In terms of self-affect, it seems reasonable that Japanese would be more concerned to avoid feeling bad than to strive to feel good about themselves, compared to North Americans, who by all indications are highly motivated to feel good about themselves (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, & Vohs, 2003). If one's self-feelings are tied to competitive outcomes, the simplest and most effective way to avoid feeling bad about oneself is to avoid undertaking difficult tasks in the first place. For most Japanese college students, avoiding English entirely is not a realistic option, as English is a required course in most if not all universities, and current government policy emphasizes the imperativeness of all Japanese citizens having a "working knowledge of English" (Hashimoto, 2007). Certainly, being enrolled in a class and actively learning the subject matter are two distinct things (McVeigh, 2004). Consequently, students whose self-esteem is relatively contingent on successfully acquiring English language skills (or performing well on tests, which may very imperfectly represent language skills) may be motivated to avoid participating in necessary learning activities. In this case, a contingency between English and self-esteem may not be a uniformly positive thing. However, the present data do not suggest that students (in this sample at least) are actively avoiding English learning and on the contrary, in many cases are devoting impressive quantities of time and effort to autonomous learning.

It should be noted that self-esteem is undoubtedly contingent on domains other than English language proficiency and that students have motivations for learning English other than self-esteem enhancement (Brown, 2004; Gardner, Masgoret, Tennant, & Mihic, 2004; Woodrow, 2006).

Finally, the lack of consistent association between the relevance of English proficiency for self-esteem and actual effort expended in pursuit of English proficiency may be attributable to the fact that virtually all participants regarded English as an important source of the sense of self-worth. Future research should identify individuals for whom English is not a major source of self-esteem, and may even be a source of self-denigration, and assess the extent to which they attempt to bolster their self-worth by expending effort to learn English.

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## Appendix

### English as a Contingency of Self-Worth Scale Items and English Translations.

1. My feelings about myself are influenced by how good I am at English. 自分自身に対する感情は自分がどれくらい英語が得意かに影響されます。
2. I feel better about myself when I feel like my English is improving.  
英語が上達しているように思えるとき、私は自分自身に対して良い感情を持ちます。
3. Being good at English gives me a sense of self-respect. 英語が得意であることは私に自尊心をもたらします。
4. I feel bad about myself when I can't speak English well.  
英語をうまく話せないとき、私は自分自身に対し悪い感情を持ちます。
5. My opinion about myself doesn't depend on how good I am at English. 自分自身に関する私の評価は、どれくらい自分が英語が得意かということには関係ありません。
6. I would feel good about myself if I could speak English fluently.  
もし英語が流暢に話すことができれば、私は自分自身に対して良い感情を持つでしょう。
7. I would be happy if I could speak English well. もし英語をうまく話すことができたならば、私は幸せです。
8. I would be proud if I were good at English. もし英語が得意であったならば、私は誇りに思います。
9. It doesn't affect my self-concept if I can't speak English well.  
英語がうまく話せなくても、そのことは私の自己概念に何の影響もありません。

### Author Note

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### Footnotes.

1. This student was absent during the first survey and did not participate