

**How Teachers' Attitudes and Methodologies  
Affect Students' Self-Esteem as  
Regards Learning the English Language.  
A Case Study with Eighth Graders**

Cómo influyen las actitudes de los docentes y sus metodologías en la autoestima de los estudiantes en el aprendizaje de la lengua inglesa. Un estudio de caso con estudiantes de octavo grado

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A research project was conducted in a public high school in Bogotá, Colombia, with forty high school students of eighth grade. The main purpose of this research was to study teachers' attitudes towards students and methodologies and to assess which of them may affect their students' development, performance, academic self-esteem and, as a consequence, their motivation. Some recommendations were suggested in order to increase the adolescent students' motivation and self-esteem and for teachers to assess their attitudes. We observed that the need for affection is an important characteristic for an adequate atmosphere that avoids social distance and facilitates learners' acquisition of new knowledge.

**Key words:** Educators-High School Teaching, Methodology-Evaluation, English-Teaching-Methods, Second Language Acquisition-Methodology-Evaluation, English-Teaching-Psychological Aspects

Un proyecto de investigación fue llevado a cabo en un colegio público de Bogotá-Colombia, con cuarenta estudiantes de grado octavo. El objetivo principal de esta investigación fue hacer un estudio acerca de las actitudes y metodologías de los docentes, y evaluar cuáles de éstas podrían afectar el desarrollo, desempeño y autoestima académica de los estudiantes y, como consecuencia, su motivación. Sugerimos algunas recomendaciones con el fin de incrementar la motivación y autoestima de los estudiantes (adolescentes), y además, la auto-evaluación de los docentes frente a sus actitudes. Pudimos observar que la necesidad de afecto es una característica importante para crear una atmósfera adecuada que impida el

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distanciamiento social y facilite que los alumnos adquieran los nuevos conocimientos de la lengua.

**Palabras claves:** Personal docente-Enseñanza secundaria-Metodología-Evaluación, Inglés-Enseñanza-Métodos, Adquisición de segundo lenguaje-Metodología-Evaluación, Inglés-Enseñanza-Aspectos Psicológicos

## INTRODUCTION

In light of our Colombian context and in accordance with 'Lineamientos Curriculares para Idiomas Extranjeros' (MEN, 1999), the access to a foreign language will let the individual be aware of his mother tongue values, limits, and qualities. It also claims that there are many indications that language is a vehicle of personality as well as of thought, for when the person speaks, he tells not only about the world but also, through both form and content, about himself. So, we think that through the use of a foreign language people have the opportunity to express their points of view, thoughts and feelings.

For many years studies have focused on the importance between self-esteem and the learning process. Most of these investigations have proved that the level of esteem influences students' attitudes and achievements towards new knowledge. Hence, Ames (1984) has stressed the importance of the relationship between academic failure or success as regards esteem and how it is accentuated or attenuated as a function of the social context.

The fact related to teachers' attitudes was something we could appreciate from our experience of a foreign language and is a thought-provoking experience as teachers. Hence, we noticed that a student with a poor image of himself /herself has difficulties when interacting and sharing information with others.

This is because the low self-esteem and the lack of security a person has disrupts his/her productivity and motivation to learn.

## 1. METHODOLOGY

We developed a case study. To do so we chose a specific group to do a research project about the topic we were interested in. The case study researcher typically observes the characteristics of an individual unit –a child, a class, a school or a community. The purpose of such observation is to analyse intensively the multifarious phenomenon that constitutes the life cycle of a unit with a view to establishing generalisations about the wider population to which that unit belongs (Cohen & Manion, 1980).

To find out in what way teachers' attitudes might affect students' self-esteem in the learning of English, we formulated questions to be answered during the research process:

- How do teachers' attitudes and methodologies affect students' self-esteem when learning the English language?

In order to answer this main query, we posed two related questions:

- What is the relationship between teachers' attitudes and students' self-esteem when learning the English language?
- How do teachers' methodologies inform us about the students' self-esteem when learning the English language?

During this research we worked collaboratively, so one of us was the teacher and the other one was the observer. In this way we had the opportunity to observe the group and jot down notes about the students' performance and feelings generated in the class.

Following principles of classroom research and case study we collected the information using different techniques. First, we created a questionnaire from which we could gather detailed information about learners' attitudes toward English at the beginning of the course, together with pupils' emotions, and feelings generated by the teacher's attitudes. Second, we designed an interview that was recorded and which complemented the questionnaire because the students had the opportunity to express their opinion on the teacher's methodology.

Another instrument was the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale that measured the level of self-esteem students had (see annex 1). Nevertheless, as Rosenberg (1965) said, this scale does not assess students' self-esteem completely; therefore it needs to be correlated with other instruments in order to give support to the findings. We translated the scale to let students understand it and express better all their feeling through their mother tongue. This scale has been widely used in studies in countries such as Turkey. It was developed by Morris Rosenberg in 1963 who is widely known for his comprehensive and theoretically rich work on the self-concept (Owens & King, 2001). The Rosenberg Scale consists of 12 subscales and 63 questions. There are 10 items in the self-esteem category that we applied without modifying because they analysed what we wanted to observe.

Moreover we used video-recordings in which we could capture, through pupils' words and

physical reactions, many details of a lesson such as learners' attitudes in group work or their interaction with the teacher. A personal diary was kept by the English teacher in which the teacher noted her impressions about students' performance and attitudes regarding the activities in each class. We also designed three schemes to facilitate taking notes in the peer observation technique (four hours per week) over a six month period by means of which we could jot down ideas about the learning process.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

To find out in what way teachers' attitudes and methodologies affect students' self-esteem to learn the English language, we took as the constructs of this project: self-esteem, adolescence, and attitudes.

### 2.1 Self-esteem

The level of self-esteem is derived from the feelings a person has about his own image and people's reactions towards him. Pope, Mc Hale, & Craighead (1988) define the concept as an evaluation of the information contained in the self-concept, which is the constellation of things a person uses to describe himself. So esteem involves loving, respect, and dignified caring. Self-esteem is a common element and present in the classroom setting because of students' competitiveness, in the sense that it provokes feelings of success and failure. Thereby, teachers as well as parents can play an important role in strengthening children's self-esteem by treating them respectfully, taking their views and opinions seriously, and expressing appreciation for them.

Many authors have studied the emotional aspects that the learning process implies and how these aspects affect the management of

behaviour. For instance, if a student feels frustration when he/she is not able to perform an activity well, this becomes a competitive failure for the students whose level of self-criticism will increase while his/her motivation will decrease. As a consequence, he/she will direct his/her attention to other things not related to the class. Hence, motivation is important because a person learns more easily and quickly if he/she has a motive to do it.

## 2.2 Adolescence

It is the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. It is a stage of not only physical changes but also of cognitive maturity and personal and social adjustment. According to Demo (2001), some authors regard that self-concept during adolescence is dominated by a psychological interior of private thoughts, desires, fears, beliefs, attitudes, and expectations. This way, there are many factors conditioning the healthy development and growth of adolescents that not only affect their personality but also their social behaviour and performance. Thus, one type of influence is the adolescents' image of their bodies that often influences their level of self-esteem and self-confidence.

According to the age and level of English learners, there are some motivational differences as regards its learning. Adolescents, for example, are perhaps the most exciting students to teach, but they can also present the teacher with more problems than any other age group. Teachers have to remember that adolescents are often brittle. They will probably no longer be inspired by mere curiosity, and teacher approval is no longer of vital importance, while peer approval and being involved in the task are vital for them (Harmer, 1990).

## 2.3 Attitudes

De Souza & Elia (1988) define attitudes as the individual's prevailing tendency to respond favourably or unfavourably to an object (person or group of people, institutions or events). Attitudes can be positive (values) or negative (prejudice). So, the word attitude defines outward and visible postures and human beliefs and determines what each individual will see, hear, think and do. Furthermore, attitudes are formed from an individual's negative and positive experiences that predispose him/her to act favourably or unfavourably to a situation or thing, and that are learned and, as a consequence, can be modified.

Thus, it is not only students' behaviour that may affect the learning process, but also teachers' attitudes. There are certain behaviours that are problematic to students, parents and teachers. These behaviours are termed "challenging behaviours" because when a student demonstrates a behavioural problem, adults are required to change inappropriate behaviours and promote the appropriate ones (Zirpoli and Melloy, 1993).

## 3. FINDINGS

For data analysis, the instruments were classified by categories and subcategories, and two of them (the questionnaire and the scale) were statistically analysed using percentages. In order to follow the triangulation method, we used the correlation technique to relate the characteristics of the categories that appeared repeatedly in all of them.

The first category in this dissertation is *students' academic self-esteem*, the second one is *students' attitudes and feelings generated in the classroom*, the third one is *teachers'*

*attitudes toward students, and the last one is good atmosphere and students' motivation.*

### 3.1 Students' Academic Self-esteem

In the first category we found that students' attitudes toward English are positive because they like it and find it very interesting especially when they are learning through games because they can compete, learn while having fun, and interact in an unstressful way and in an atmosphere of confidence. It means that pupils have in general, a good commitment to the class. *"Me gustan las actividades que hace la profesora porque son variadas y no siempre es la misma."*, *"Eh! A mí me gustan las guías que nos da la maestra para poder desarrollar..."*, *"Me gustó el juego de concéntrese porque se integra más el curso y... pues sí, se integra uno con los compañeros que... que uno no se hablaba y eso."* Moreover pupils feel demotivated when they cannot express themselves orally in English and show rejection and feelings of fear toward individual work and oral participation. Also, we observed that pupils greeted the teacher as a friend and looked for her after class to talk and share ideas, which could reflect that learners like to have a close relationship with the educator.

### 3.2 Students' Attitudes and Feelings Generated in the Classroom

For the second category we found that students who usually do not participate do so when interacting in games or in communicative activities through topics that interest them, because they feel confident and important. Maybe they feel challenged and encouraged by their partners when they are competing; hence they feel motivated. *"Pues algunos compañeros lo tienen en cuenta a uno, pero algunos no. Algunos se preocupan por ellos y no se*

*preocupan por... por los demás, por el curso, entonces..."*, *"Ellos me han demostrado mucho el afecto que me tienen..."*, *"Ellos me aconsejan que siga adelante con los trabajos para que salga bien, que no... que no me vaya a echar para atrás, que siga siempre para adelante."*

Students like to learn in a fun way, with didactic materials and through activities that let them interact because they can express themselves. This aspect is vital for pupils because it helps them to perform in the social context that they daily have to face and affects, in some way, their self-esteem as well as their performance. On the other hand, pupils feel bad, rejected and demotivated when the teacher does not appreciate their effort.

### 3.3 Teachers' Attitudes toward Students

In the third category we could observe that teachers have self-concepts that affect their own conduct, students' conduct, and their ability to construct healthy relationships. Moreover, we consider pupils have a good level of what Maslow (1970) called a need for love and belonging because they consider themselves important for the teacher: *"Mi profesora... ¡uhmm! nos apoya, eh! A todas las opiniones las acoge y son muy respetables..."*, *"Me lo demuestra cuando hago las tareas o cuando por ejemplo es una de las pocas profesoras que se sabe mi nombre."* On the other hand, students feel bad and demotivated when teachers have negative attitudes, both verbal (scornful words) and non-verbal (wry faces and gestures). *"Sí un profesor le dijo a mi compañero que no fuera sapo."*

### 3.4 Good Atmosphere and Students' Motivation

Finally, in the last category our findings are that repetitive work and classes where pupils

cannot interact actively provoke their lack of attention. There are many motivational aspects for students to learn English like: the activities, the partners, the importance of language in life and the necessity. We could realise that one of the most difficult problems a new teacher faces is classroom management. When classroom management is not working well, discipline problems often result. Both issues are enormous challenges for any teacher, new or veteran. We should all be careful of cluttering an ideal classroom up with funny questions and sarcastic remarks. In order to create an atmosphere of mutual respect, we should not say things in a manner that sets up the student or ourselves for a fall.

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

With the reviewed theory and the findings of the analysed data, we could answer the questions posed in connection to the relationship between teachers' attitudes and methodologies and students' self-esteem when learning the English language. We could conclude that it is of vital importance for pupils that educators treat them as friends and make efforts to avoid placing hierarchical barriers. Students expressed how important it was for them that teachers knew their names and that they were allowed to express their thoughts and feelings. Also, students need to receive feedback on their work and performance in class promptly. Likewise, we discovered that when the teacher corrects students kindly and takes into account their efforts and progress and not only their results, he/she creates a warm atmosphere. So, teachers need to bear in mind that learners, before being good students, are human beings.

As far as pedagogical implications, we think it is important that teachers develop a reflective

way of thinking about their work as teachers in all aspects of their profession. Therefore we want to point out some recommendations in order to make us –teachers- observe, reflect about their attitudes, and develop a position of self-awareness toward their role. Additionally we suggest adopting some strategies that could help us to foster learners' academic self-esteem and willingness to learn English in order to maintain an adequate educational environment in the teaching-learning process.

Pupils feel demotivated with repetitive classes where they cannot interact actively and also when they cannot express themselves orally in English. These could be the reasons learners show rejection and feelings of fear toward individual work and oral participation. We suggest teachers take into account students who usually do not participate. This situation could be overcome if they are given opportunities to interact in games or in communicative activities through topics related to their interests.

On the other hand, teachers have self-concepts that affect their own conduct, students' conduct, and their ability to construct healthy relationships. This stresses the importance of creating a close relationship with the students.

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**ANNEX 1: ROSENBERG SELF-ESTEEM SCALE**

(Rosenberg, 1965)

Con este cuestionario intentamos conocer algunas de tus actitudes en general hacia tí mismo.

Si estás completamente de acuerdo, marca CA. Si estás de acuerdo, marca A. Si estás en desacuerdo marca D. Y si estás completamente en desacuerdo, marca CD. Marca una sola respuesta.

	1 Completamente de acuerdo	2 De acuerdo	3 Desacuerdo	4 Completamente en desacuerdo
1 Siento que soy una persona que vale mucho o al menos que tengo el mismo valor que los demás.	CA	DA	D	CD
2 Siento que tengo muy buenas cualidades.	CA	DA	D	CD
3 Usualmente siento que soy un fracaso.	CA	DA	D	CD
4 Soy capaz de hacer las cosas tan bien como los demás.	CA	DA	D	CD
5 Siento que no tengo mucho de qué sentirme orgulloso.	CA	DA	D	CD
6 Usualmente, tomo una actitud positiva hacia mí mismo.	CA	DA	D	CD
7 En general, me siento satisfecho conmigo mismo.	CA	DA	D	CD
8 Desearía poder tener más respeto conmigo mismo.	CA	DA	D	CD
9 Algunas veces siento que soy inútil.	CA	DA	D	CD
10 Algunas veces pienso que no soy del todo bueno como persona.	CA	DA	D	CD