The Relation of Academic Self-Concept to Motivation among University EFL Students

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Abstract

This study mainly examines the relation between academic self-concept and motivation in foreign language learning. Subjects comprised 434 first-year university students drawn from four different ability levels. Statistical analyses were performed to ascertain: (1) whether there is any significant relationship between academic self-concept and learning motivation for students of different proficiency levels, (2) whether both academic self-concept and motivation have significant relation with gender, (3) whether both academic self-concept and motivation are significantly related to students' self-evaluation of their language performance, and (4) whether academic self-concept is a significant predictor of students' motivation in learning a foreign language. Findings of the study show that all of the academic self-concept related variables and the motivation components are positively and significantly correlated. The correlations between overall academic self-concept and motivation scores are high and significant for all of the following groups: the full sample and the lower- and higher-ability level groups. Higher-level students tend to have higher correlations between these two variables than their lower-level counterparts. Students' self-evaluation of their proficiency level is moderately correlated with academic self-concept and learning motivation, while gender is weakly correlated with these two major variables. In addition, results of multiple regression analysis reveal that academic self-concept serves as a significant and strong predictor of learning motivation.

Keywords: academic self-concept, learning motivation, language learning

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I. Introduction

The role of affective variables in second- or foreign-language learning has attracted much attention in individual difference research over the past few decades (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993; Sparkes & Ganschow, 2001). These affective variables can refer to attributes that involve students' attitudes and motivation, language anxiety, learning styles, and perceptions of academic self. Among them, academic self-concept has been shown to be an important affective variable that has a reciprocal relation with academic performance in a large number of studies (Guay, Marsh, & Boivin, 2003; Marsh, Hau, & Kong, 2002). Many researchers have reported a positive correlation between student academic self-concept and performance in the language learning class (Liu, 2008; Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983; Muijs, 1997). As to motivation, it is one of the most extensively investigated variables and has also been consistently demonstrated to play a significant role in language learning (Brown, Robson, & Rosenkjar, 2001; Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Gardner, Tremblay, & Masgoret, 1997; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). Substantial research has been done on academic self-concept and language learning motivation. Nonetheless, not much research has focused on the relation between these two variables. It is the purpose of the present study to gain a fuller understanding of the variables in the Taiwanese EFL context.

II. Review of Related Literature

A. Academic Self-Concept

Redd, Brooks, & McGarvey (2001) defined academic self-concept as "an individual's perception of his or her level of competence or ability within the academic realm." Similarly, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, Köller, and Baumert (2006) defined academic self-concept as "a person's self-evaluation regarding a specific academic domain or ability." According to the self-concept model posited by Shavelson, Hubner, and Stanton (1976), the construct was hierarchical and multifaceted in nature such that self-concepts in specific domains such as English, math, history, and science are the subcomponents of one general academic self-concept. Considerable studies have been conducted to test and support the multidimensionality of the construct (Lau, Yeung, & Jin, 1998; Marsh, 1994; Marsh,

Byrne, & Shavelson, 1988; Marsh & O'Neill, 1984; Marsh, Relich, & Smith, 1983; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985).

Self-concept research has attracted the interest of researchers in various disciplines because numerous research studies conducted over the past decades have suggested that academic self-concept and academic performance are interrelated. Some studies have shown that academic self-concept functions as a significant predictor of students' academic performance (Choi, 2005; Liu, 2008; Muijs, 1997). Other studies intended to examine the causal relationships between the two variables (Barker, Dowson, & McInerney, 2005; Helmke & van Aken, 1995; Marsh, Trautwein, Lüdtke, Köller, & Baumert, 2005). Most studies have supported the contention that academic self-concept and achievement have a reciprocal relationship. Changes in one variable may lead to changes in the other.

Byrne (1988) noted that social comparison plays a vital role in the development of self-concept. Students are inclined to form their perceptions of selves using their classmates or schoolmates as a reference group. Trautwein, Lüdtke, Marsh, Köller, and Baumert (2006) suggested that academic self-concept may differ as a function of not only their own academic achievement but also the achievement of their reference group. Researchers found that academic self-concepts of students may be enhanced when they are placed in a high-achieving group and "assimilation effects" occur in this case (Marsh, Kong, & Hau, 2000; Trautwein et al., 2006). To the contrary, when students' academic self-concepts are negatively affected by the above-average performance of their high-achieving group members, "contrast effects" occur. Marsh and his collaborators (Marsh, 1991, 1994; Marsh & Hau, 2003; Marsh & Parker, 1984) proposed the Big-Fish-Little-Pond effect (BFLPE) to explain these frame-of-reference effects and contended that academic self-concept is positively correlated with academic performance; however, the average ability level of students' peers in class or school can have a negative effect on the formation of specific academic self-concepts.

B. Motivation in Language Learning

Over the past few decades, there has been growing interest in exploring learning motivation to understand why people learn a second or a foreign language. Numerous research studies have demonstrated that motivation is related to how well students perform in a language classroom (Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994; Dörnyei, 1994; Gardner & MacIntyre, 1991). The formulation of second language motivation was first proposed by Gardner and his associates (Gardner & Lambert, 1959; Gardner &

Smythe, 1975) and has inspired much of the research in this field (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1994; Jacques, 2001; Syed, 2001; Tremblay & Gardner, 1995). A distinction between integrative and instrumental orientations in their socio-educational model of second-language learning has received the most attention. An integrative orientation refers to the desire and willingness to learn a second language for the reason of interacting or identifying with members of other language groups. An instrumental orientation emphasizes the practical goals and advantages of learning a second language, such as getting a better job or passing an exam. Gardner and MacIntyre (1991) pointed out that both integrative motivation and instrumental motivation facilitate language acquisition.

In addition to goal orientation, Gardner (1985) claimed that motivation should also include a "combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes toward learning the language." For a student to be motivated to learn, all of these elements have to be linked to achieve the academic goal. None of these alone can lead to motivation. Crookes and Schmidt (1991) broadened the definitional framework of motivation and suggested that motivation should include four major determinants: (1) interest in learning the language, (2) relevance which involves the perception that personal needs are being met by the learning situation, (3) expectation for success or failure, and (4) extrinsic and intrinsic rewards. As indicated by Oxford and Shearin (1994), there is a lack of consensus on the definition of learning motivation. Dörnyei and Clement (2001) noted that motivation to learn is a "complex phenomenon involving a number of diverse sources and conditions." A number of researchers have attempted to expand Gardner's theory and investigate a variety of orientations that have important motivational effects to make the model of motivation in language learning more elaborate and comprehensive (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Dörnyei, 1990a, 1994; Ely, 1986; Noels, 2001; Oxford & Shearin, 1994).

Concerned about the difference between second language learning context and foreign language learning context, Dörnyei (1990a) examined the motivational components in foreign language learning in the Hungarian setting and contended that in addition to two subsystems, an instrumental subsystem and an integrative motivational subsystem, two other components should be taken into consideration in the formulation of a motivation construct: need for achievement and attributions about past failure. Both of these are specific to the foreign language learning context. According to Dörnyei (1990a, 1990b), the third component, need for achievement, can make a great contribution to motivation in foreign language learning.

Another important and well-known distinction in the motivation research is between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Based on self-determination theory, orientations toward language learning can be designated as a continuum of motivation intensity and are divided into three major categories, including intrinsic and extrinsic orientations and amotivation (Noels, Pelletier, Clement, & Vallerand, 2000; Noels, 2001). While intrinsic orientations are built upon inherent enjoyment and interest, extrinsic orientations are defined as practical reasons, such as getting good grades. Different subtypes of extrinsic orientations vary in accordance with the level of the internationalization and integration into one's self-concept (Noels, 2001). As to the third category of a motivation construct, amotivation, it is on the opposite side of the other two orientations on the continuum of self-determination. According to Noels (2001), students feel "amotivated" when the outcome is independent of their actions. It is similar to an experience called "learned helplessness," which leads to a lack of motivation in a learning activity.

C. Research Questions

The study explores the following research questions: (1) Is there any significant correlation between academic self-concept and motivation to learn in the foreign language classroom for students of different English proficiency levels? (2) Are both academic self-concept and motivation significantly related to gender? (3) Do both academic self-concept and motivation have significant relation with students' self-ratings of their language proficiency? (4) Can academic self-concept serve as a significant predictor of students' motivation in learning a foreign language?

III. Method

A. Subjects

The sample comprised 434 first-year university students. Before entering the university in central Taiwan, they were administered the intermediate level listening and reading tests of the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT) and then assigned to four different levels of classes for English instruction based on the objective measure of their proficiency. Three classes of students at each ability level participated in the study. The numbers of subjects of each sex in each ability group are shown in Table 1. For the purpose of statistical analysis, subjects placed into the lowest and second lowest ability levels (level 1 and level 2) were further combined into one group, while subjects in the highest and second highest ability levels (level 4 and level 3) were

combined into another group. The administration of the questionnaires to the subjects took place at the beginning of the 2008-2009 academic year.

Table 1：Numbers of Male and Female Students of Different Ability Levels

	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Total
Male	69	58	69	52	248
Female	29	55	41	61	186
Total	98	113	110	113	434

B. Instruments

A questionnaire adapted from Liu, Wang, and Parkins' (2005) academic self-concept (ASC) scale was used to measure students' academic self-concept. The scale consisted of two subscales, the 9-item academic confidence (AC) and the 10-item academic effort (AE) subscales. According to Liu et al. (2005), students' perceptions of academic confidence and effort are two first-order factors of academic self-concept. The scale used in the study was revised into a 6-point Likert format, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The Cronbach alphas of the ASC scale, AC subscale, and AE subscale were .90, .83, and .84, respectively.

Another questionnaire adapted from Gardner's (1985) Attitude/Motivation Test Battery (AMTB) was used to measure students' motivation. The AMTB was originally designed to assess various affective variables. The questionnaire used in the study incorporated three subscales derived from the AMTB to assess students' motivation: attitudes toward learning English, motivational intensity, and desire to learn English. Reponses for 9 items measuring the first component, attitudes toward learning English, were built on a 6-point Likert-type scale. The other two components, motivational intensity (8 items) and desire to learn English (9 items), were multiple-choice items with three options for each. Students' motivation scores were the sum of these three subscale scores. The internal consistency reliability coefficients for these three subscales were .91, .78, and .75, respectively. The reliability for the entire questionnaire containing a total of 26 items was found to be .93. Both questionnaires used in this study were revised and translated into a Chinese version by the researcher for use in the Taiwanese EFL context

C. Data Analysis

To examine the relationships among the factors of academic self-concept and motivation and other related variables such as gender and self-ratings of English proficiency, correlational analyses were conducted on the full sample. Similar

correlational analyses were also performed for both lower- and higher-ability students to ascertain the significance of the relationship between the two major affective variables. For the first research question, Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficients of all of the variables related to academic self-concept and motivation were obtained. To examine the relationships among gender, academic self-concept, and motivation, Pearson correlation coefficients were also calculated for these variables. To address the third research question, Spearman rank order correlation coefficients were computed to examine the relation of the two major variables (academic self-concept and motivation) to students' self-ratings of their language performance, since the latter one variable is of ordinal scaling. Finally, multiple regression analysis was employed to determine whether academic self-concept can significantly predict students' motivation in English learning.

All of the Likert-type format items, including the one which asks students to evaluate their own English proficiency, were rated by the students with an option from 1 to 6. Except for the negatively worded items, a higher score indicated stronger agreement to the statement. Negatively worded items were scored in reverse. As to the multiple-choice items, they were scored based on the scoring key provided in the AMTB.

IV. Results and Discussion

The means and standard deviations of the academic self-concept and motivation scale and subscale scores of each proficiency group were computed and are presented in Table 2. The overall scores of each scale were obtained by adding all of the subscale scores.

To ascertain the first research question, a Pearson product-moment correlation matrix was first obtained and analyzed for the full sample. The correlation coefficients help determine not only the direction but also the magnitude of relationships of these variables. Next, students who were grouped into level 1 and level 2 were combined into one group, lower-ability group. Similarly, students who were assigned to level 3 and level 4 were combined into one group, higher-ability group. The Pearson correlations for the full sample and these two ability groups are reported in Table 3.

The results presented in Table 3 show that all of the academic self-concept factors and the motivation components are positively and highly significantly

Table 2：Means and Standard Deviations of Students' Academic Self-Concept and Motivation Scale and Subscale Scores

	Level 1		Level 2		Level 3		Level 4	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
ASC								
Confidence	26.56	6.29	25.39	5.76	28.89	5.70	5.91	
Effort	36.07	7.68	37.33	6.81	39.34	7.25	44.07	6.34
Overall	62.63	12.50	62.72	10.93	68.23	10.95	79.50	11.00
Motivation								
Attitudes	36.97	7.58	37.08	5.59	39.52	6.02	43.84	5.91
Intensity	15.58	2.91	15.85	2.81	16.86	2.40	18.24	2.23
Desire	17.32	3.21	17.73	3.20	18.88	2.76	21.51	2.32
Overall	69.87	12.45	70.65	10.20	75.26	9.80	83.59	8.82

Note. ASC = Academic Self-Concept; Confidence = Academic Confidence; Effort = Academic Effort; Attitudes = Attitudes toward Learning English; Intensity = Motivational Intensity; Desire = Desire to Learn English

Table 3：Correlations between Academic Self-Concept and Motivation in Learning English for the Full Sample and Students of Different Proficiency Level

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Full Sample							
ASC							
1. Confidence	－						
2. Effort	.622**	－					
3. Overall	.893**	.908**	－				
Motivation							
4. Attitudes	.577**	.747**	.738**	－			
5. Intensity	.577**	.735**	.732**	.657**	－		
6. Desire	.666**	.704**	.761**	.716**	.688**	－	
7. Overall	.666**	.814**	.825**	.948**	.821**	.869**	－
Lower Ability Group							
ASC							
1. Confidence	－						
2. Effort	.540**	－					
3. Overall	.853**	.900**	－				
Motivation							
4. Attitudes	.472**	.695**	.676**	－			
5. Intensity	.515**	.700**	.701**	.645**	－		
6. Desire	.584**	.656**	.709**	.693**	.678**	－	
7. Overall	.571**	.768**	.772**	.942**	.821**	.859**	－

Higher Ability Group
ASC

1. Confidence	—					
2. Effort	.583**	—				
3. Overall	.880**	.899**	—			
Motivation						
4. Attitudes	.536**	.735**	.718**	—		
5. Intensity	.512**	.712**	.692**	.581**	—	
6. Desire	.610**	.668**	.719**	.652**	.599**	—
7. Overall	.626**	.813**	.813**	.943**	.766**	.828**	—

** $p < .01$

correlated. For the full sample, a relatively high correlation of .825 was found between students' overall academic self-concept scores and overall motivation scores. The lowest correlation (.577) among these variables was found to be between academic confidence and attitudes toward learning English and between academic confidence and motivational intensity. Nonetheless, the correlation was moderate, not low. Compared with academic confidence, students' perceived academic effort had higher correlations with all of the components of motivation in learning English.

The zero-order correlations between academic self-concept and learning motivation were also highly and significantly correlated for both lower- and higher-ability groups: .772 and .813, respectively. Consistent with the findings for the full sample, learning motivation had higher correlations with students' perceptions of academic effort than with self-confidence. Except for one of the components, motivational intensity, the correlations between academic self-concept and learning motivation tended to be higher for higher-proficiency level students than for lower-proficiency students. The findings show that even though the correlations between motivation intensity and academic confidence and between motivation intensity and overall academic self-concept were found to be lower for higher-ability students than for lower-ability students, the differences were very slight: 0.003 and 0.009, respectively.

In order to gain more understanding of students' academic self-concept and motivation, correlational analysis was performed on the full sample to investigate the relationships among the two major variables and the other two related variables, gender and students' self-evaluation of their proficiency level (Table 4). The results show that all of the pairwise correlations are positive and significant. First, gender and academic self-concept and motivation were significantly but weakly correlated.

Female students tended to have higher academic self-concept and motivation scores than their male counterparts (see Table 5). Nevertheless, the correlations are relatively low. Second, students' self-evaluation of their language performance was moderately correlated with their academic self-concept and learning motivation, ranging from .401 to .686. Third, self-evaluation of students' ability level had higher correlation with academic self-concept (.619) than with learning motivation (.477). Furthermore, they are more highly correlated with academic confidence (.686) than with academic effort (.432).

Table 4：Correlations between Academic Self-Concept, Motivation and Other Related Variables

	Gender (Pearson's r)	Self-evaluation of English proficiency level (Spearman's rho)
ASC		
1. Confidence	.119*	.686**
2. Effort	.166**	.432**
3. Overall	.159**	.619**
Motivation		
4. Attitudes	.196**	.401**
5. Intensity	.175**	.460**
6. Desire	.192**	.503**
7. Overall	.212**	.477**

*$p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Table 5：Means and Standard Deviations of Academic Self-Concept and Motivation Scores for Males and Females

	Males		Females	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
ASC				
Confidence	28.43	7.04	30.12	7.04
Effort	38.21	7.97	40.77	6.90
Overall	66.64	13.59	70.89	12.39
Motivation				
Attitudes	38.27	6.88	40.98	6.53
Intensity	16.25	2.84	17.23	2.62
Desire	18.36	3.48	19.65	2.93
Overall	72.88	11.98	77.86	10.62

Finally, in order to determine the last research question of whether academic self-concept is a significant predictor of students' motivation to learn English, multiple regression analysis was conducted on the full sample using a stepwise procedure. The results of the regression model are shown in Table 6.

Table 6：Results of Multiple Regression Model for Predicting Foreign-Language Learning Motivation

Variable	Regression coefficient	Standard error	Beta	t	p
Effort	.999	.051	.653	19.537	.000 **
Confidence	.428	.055	.260	7.775	.000 **

Model: R^2 = .705; Adjusted R^2 =.703; F (2, 431) = 514.149;
** $p < .01$

The F value of the regression model was 514.15, which was found to be highly significant. Both of the academic self-concept factors, academic effort and academic confidence, were significant predictors of English learning motivation. When academic effort was first entered into the regression model as a single predictor, it alone accounted for 66.3% of the variance of students' motivation in learning English. When academic confidence was also entered into the model, about 70% of the motivation variance was explained by the combined effect of these two factors. The results suggest that academic effort contributed much more to the prediction of foreign language learning motivation than academic confidence.

V. Summary and Conclusion

The study was mainly designed to gain more insight into one important determinant of foreign-language performance, academic self-concept, and its relation with motivation to learn in the foreign language classroom. The key research findings are summarized as follows:

1. A highly positive relationship between academic self-concept and foreign-language learning motivation was consistently found for the full sample and two comparison groups, lower- and higher-proficiency groups. The findings establish that EFL students who have more positive academic self-concept are more motivated to learn. Also, the relationship between these two important affective variables was found to be stronger for higher ability group than for their lower ability counterparts. All of the pairwise correlations were not only positive but also highly significant.

2. Students with higher evaluation of their own language performance tend to have higher academic self-concept or motivation to learn English. Both academic self-concept and learning motivation were found to be moderately correlated with students' self-evaluation of English proficiency level. Academic self-concept was found to have higher correlation with students' perceptions of their own ability level than learning motivation. Of the two factors of academic self-concept, academic

confidence is more highly correlated with the measure of ability level than academic effort.

3. The multiple regression findings indicate that academic self-concept can significantly predict students' foreign-language learning motivation. Two variables in the regression model, academic effort and academic confidence, were shown to be significant predictors of motivation, explaining a total of 70.5% of the variance in learning motivation. As academic effort accounted for a great proportion of the total variance in motivation (66%), it played the most important role in predicting learning motivation. It should also be noted that that academic effort was highly correlated with all of the motivational components. Academic confidence may not have as strong a correlation with the determinants of motivation as academic effort; however, it is still moderately correlated with all of these variables.

In general, there are two major implications of this research study. First, the results support numerous research findings that academic self-concept is an important determinant of students' academic performance (Byrne, 1990; Choi, 2005; Marsh, Hau, & Kong, 2002; Muijs, 1997). No one will dispute that motivation plays a crucial role in language acquisition (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991; Oxford & Shearin, 1994; Wigfield, Eccles, & Rodriguez, 1998). As academic self-concept and learning motivation are highly correlated, positive perceptions of academic self will certainly lead to stronger motivation to learn, and hopefully better learning outcomes. Second, since self-concept is formed through a person's experiences and interaction with the environment (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003; Marsh & Shavelson, 1985), the strong link between academic self-concept and learning motivation suggests that motivation is also subject to change. A wide range of factors may contribute to the formation of the construct. As suggested by Wigfield, Eccles, and Rodriguez (1998), learning is a "social activity." Motivation to learn may involve not only learners' self-perceptions but also learners' reciprocal relations with teacher, school, and classroom environmental factors. Thus, there is always hope and room for more effort to enhance students' academic self-concept and learning motivation.

Maintaining a positive academic-self concept and increasing students' motivation to learn are not easy tasks and they need to be regarded as important educational objectives for foreign language teachers. According to Dörnyei (2001), one of the effective ways to help learners build positive self-concept is to provide them with positive feedback. Marsh and Craven (1997) noted that students often evaluate their academic achievement in relation to the ability levels of other students. The external comparison process may have great influence on student academic

self-concept. Rather than judging students against peer achievement, Dörnyei (2001) suggested that teachers should constantly encourage them. First, teachers can help students attribute their failures to lack of effort rather than to lack of sufficient ability. Second, to help students build more confidence, teachers can provide them with opportunities of success in learning a language or adjust the difficulty level of learning tasks according to their capabilities. Moreover, teachers can teach students appropriate learning strategies to help them learn more effectively.

Measure of motivation in the current study was based on Gardner's (1985) definition that it is the combination of favorable attitudes toward learning, effort expended in learning, and the desire to learn. Extensive studies have shown that motivation to learn is the function of a variety of factors (Ho, 1998). As previously mentioned, Crookes and Schmidt (1991) stated that motivation can be determined by interest, relevance, expectancy, and outcomes. Ho (1998) suggested that EFL student in Taiwan are more instrumentally than integratively oriented. Many researchers consider foreign language learning as a "complex social process" (Clement, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1994). In addition to factors at learner level, motivation may also be a function of various components at learning situation level, including course-specific, teacher-specific, and group-specific variables (Dörnyei, 1994). It would be helpful to include instrumental and integrative orientations or other aspects of motivational variables in future research.

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EFL 大學生的學業自我概念與學習動機之相關分析

劉慧如[*]

摘　要

　　本研究主要是分析學業自我概念與外語學習動機之間的相關。樣本為被編入四個不同等級的 434 名大一新生。統計方法的使用在探究下列研究問題：（1）是否不同能力等級學生的學業自我概念與外語學習動機都存在有顯著的相關？（2）是否學生的學業自我概念和學習動機與性別有著顯著相關？(3)是否學業自我概念和學習動機與學生自我語言能力的評量有著顯著相關？(4)學業自我概念是否能有效地預測學生的外語學習動機？研究結果顯示所有構成學業自我概念和學習動機各因素之間的相關都是正向而且顯著。以下組別的學業自我概念和學習動機的量表總分都是高度顯著相關：整體樣本、低能力等級與高能力等級的學生。高能力等級學生的學業自我概念和學習動機之間的相關較低能力等級學生高。學業自我概念與外語學習動機這兩變項與學生自我語言能力的評量皆有著中度相關，而性別與此兩變項則是低度相關。此外，多元迴歸分析的結果顯示學業自我概念可作為學生學習動機強而顯著的預測變項。

關鍵詞：學業自我概念、學習動機、語言學習

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