



The Relationship between Self-Esteem and Conversational Dominance of Iranian EFL Learners' Speaking

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Abstract

The crucial role of affective factors like anxiety, inhibition, motivation, and self-esteem have long been of interest in the field of language learning due to their enormous association with the cognitive processes involved in performance in a second or foreign language. This study aimed at investigating the relationship between Iranian EFL learners' self-esteem and conversational dominance in terms of total spoken words, total spoken turns, and interruptions in mixed groups (advanced and intermediate levels). The participants were EFL advanced and intermediate female learners in Iran Language Institute (ILI) Tabriz, Iran. The data was collected by administering Coppersmith self-esteem questionnaire and recording and transcribing oral data. Pearson coefficient was used to examine the significance of correlation between self-esteem measures and the components of conversational dominance in speaking performance. The results showed a positive correlation between self-esteem and conversational dominance in terms of total spoken words, total spoken turns, and interruptions among the learners. The foundational role of affective variables in cognitive performance is emphasized as a result.

Keywords: Affective Factors, Self-Esteem, Conversational Dominance, Speaking, and Turn Taking

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Introduction

People use language in their everyday life for different purposes. They use it to talk to their friends, to express their feelings, to get things done and to have other people fulfill their requests. These demands can be best accomplished in the set of language pieces gathered in the form of conversation which has its own rules and structures. During last century, the study of conversational rules and structures developed under the shadow of a method called conversation analysis. Conversation analysis (CA) observes speech in interaction and the methods that speakers use to structure their conversation and maintain it during the interaction. On the other hand, being dominant in conversations and being able to express ourselves, can be connected to different factors such as personal, cognitive, and affective factors. The theories and ideas related to human behaviors and affective factors are effective in the educational contexts, as well. This fact is more influential in the field of language learning especially learning a foreign or a second language. One of the most outstanding affective variables is self-esteem. Self-esteem is regarded as a crucial factor in personal happiness and affective functioning. People want and need high self-esteem to overcome their problems effectively, to feel better, and to reach personal goals. Scholars believe that any normal child can learn a first language. However, when it comes to the learning of foreign languages, especially at the later stages, there are factors which can either inhibit or enhance the process of learning. These factors can be cognitive, affective, biological, and socio-cultural variables (Stern, 1983).

Theoretical Underpinnings

One of the most important dimensions in social interactions is dominance. Dominance, power, and status have been defined in many different ways and have often been used interchangeably. Dominance is a concept largely studied in social psychology; however, it is one of the basic mechanisms of social interaction which has essential effects on communication among individuals both in the same and mixed group conversations.

It is clear that certain people are consistently successful at dominating conversations and their final consequences. In fact, within a few minutes of interaction among unacquainted individuals, a dominance order or a participation hierarchy often emerges. According to Jayagopi, Hung, Yeo and Gatica-Perez (2009), while dominant behavior could bring benefits to the person demonstrating it in certain contexts, in others it could negatively affect the social dynamics of a group, influencing its cohesiveness and effectiveness, and damaging social relationships. This can be more harmful in conversations among different genders. Therefore, assessing the interaction partners is important for successful social interactions. As mentioned earlier, dominance is a fundamental concept in social interaction but it may have different interpretations. Mast (2002) believed that in social psychology, dominance is often seen in two ways, “as a personality characteristic (trait) and to indicate a person’s hierarchical position within a group” (p. 421).

Although dominance and closely related terms like power, status, and influence have multiple definitions and are often used as equivalent, Dunbar and Burgoon (2005) advocated for a clearer distinction; power being “the capacity to produce intended effects, and in particular, the ability to influence the behavior of another person” and dominance being a set of “expressive, relationally based communicative acts by which power is exerted and influence achieved”, “one behavioral manifestation of the relational construct of power”, and “necessarily manifest” (pp. 208-209).

According to Dunbar and Burgoon (2005), nonverbal categories consist of vocalic and kinesic indicators. Vocalic cues include amount of speaking time (or length), speech loudness (or energy), speech tempo, pitch, vocal control, and interruptions. Among these, speaking activity as measured by speaking length has shown to be a particularly strong cue to predict dominance. Kinesic cues include body movement, posture, and elevation, and gestures, facial expressions, and eye gaze. In particular, it has been found that, regarding body movement, dominant people are normally more active than non-dominant people (the former move more and with a wider range of motion; the latter tend to be more limited in their amount and range of body activity). On the other hand, gestures that accompany speech are positively correlated with dominance. This suggests that visual activity (and in particular, activity that correlates with speaking activity) are strong cues for predicting dominance.

Similarly, it is mentioned by Aran and Gaticia-Perez (2010) that dominance can be signaled by both verbal and nonverbal cues. The nonverbal cues include vocalic ones such as speaking time, loudness, pitch, vocal control, turns, and interruptions; and kinesthetic ones such as gesturing, posture, facial expressions, and gaze. Dominant people are in general more active both vocally and kinetically, with an impression of relaxation and confidence. It has been shown that, they also have a higher visual dominance ratio (looking-while-speaking to looking-while-listening ratio), i.e. they look at others more while speaking and less while listening.

Aran and Gaticia-Perez (2010) stated that in parallel to the verbal elements (the spoken words), the nonverbal information is conveyed as wordless messages through aural cues (voice quality, speaking style, and intonation) and also through visual cues (gestures, body posture, facial expression, and gaze). These cues can be used to predict human behavior, personality, and social relations, in a very wide range of situations. It has been shown that, in many social situations, humans can correctly interpret nonverbal cues and can predict behavioral outcomes with high accuracy, when exposed to short segments or “thin slices” of expressive behavior (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1992, as cited in Aran & Gaticia-Perez, 2010). “The length of these thin slices can change from a few seconds to several minutes depending on different situations” (p.1).

Although dominance is classically thought of as a purposive act in which one uses resources for the exertion of power, Huston (1983, as cited in Dunbar and Burgoon, 2005) argued that individuals with greater power may also express that power unintentionally. Hence, the person with more power than the other partner

may influence the partner without necessarily intending to. For example, an unevenness of power may provide one partner with more freedom of movement and may require the secondary person to expect the desires of the more powerful one. This may be demonstrated nonverbally, such as through greater visual attentiveness on the part of the secondary partner, but it is not likely to be intended by the less powerful, or noticed by the more powerful partner. West and Zimmerman (1983, p. 59, as cited in Ouertani, 2015) provided a widely accepted definition of interruption as “a device for exercising power and control in conversation” and “violations of speakers turns at talk”. In mixed gender pairs, West and Zimmerman found that interruptions were much more likely to come from men. In one study, 96 percent of interruptions were made by the man; in another, 75 percent.

On the other hand, most studies (Apter, 1998; Branden, 1999; Murk, 1999) considered self-esteem as the personal judgment, opinion and the internal attitude of one’s self. If this judgment is positive, it will lead learners to success. If it is negative, it leads to troubles and low academic achievement. In other words, as mentioned by Bagheri and Faghih (2012) students who feel good about themselves are the ones who most likely to do better. Likewise, important people in one’s life such as parents, friends, or teachers form one’s view about the self. A person consciously or unconsciously adopts others’ judgments and deals with them as reality. In brief, the internal picture of oneself is drawn by judgments made of the person him/herself or by people around him. Others could build or damage self-esteem by their positive or negative views.

Redenbach (1991) emphasized the significant role of high self-esteem in academic achievement, social, and personal responsibility. He believed that human potential development for people of all ages is enhanced through high self-esteem. High self-esteem can start to develop when all individuals and their personal and group contributions are recognized and encouraged, especially in a multi-culturally various world. He supposed that self-esteem is the major element that affects the level of proficiency in all fields. It has been correlated to different issues, such as job success, school achievement, interpersonal compatibility, and general happiness.

Lawrence (2000) added that self-esteem construct is identified as a major factor in learning outcomes. Research has consistently shown a positive correlation between how people value themselves and the level of their academic attainments (Hisken, 2011). Those who feel confident, generally achieve more. On the other hand, those who lack confidence in themselves achieve less. The majority of students are likely to have low self-esteem since they feel to be poor over not being able to read, write, or spell like most others.

Hughes and Coplan (2010) mentioned another factor that is effective in self-esteem that is shyness. This feeling is characterized as a temperamental feature that is shown as a sense of wariness and self-consciousness in social situations where people feel like they are being evaluated. Being shy can be a problem for students’ self-esteem, because they may not have enough confidence to see themselves in public.

Factors that may lower academic achievement are anxiety and pessimism, while self-esteem and optimism may increase academic achievement. The results of El-Anzi's (2005) study revealed that there was a significant relationship between academic achievement and self-esteem, though it was not found whether self-esteem is the cause of academic achievement or if academic achievement is the cause of self-esteem.

Teachers, administrators, and other school personnel are key influences in students' lives and the influence of these adults can be a positive force for high self-esteem in students. Having positive, encouraging interactions with adults they see every day at school can help students feel more confident. It can also remind students that the adults are interested and aware of how they are doing in school and the students may be more likely to make sure they do not disappoint the adults around them.

According to Caselman (2007), some of the areas shown to have different levels of self-esteem for students include math and reading concepts, peer relationships, parent relationships, and physical appearance. Peer relationships in children and teens can be seen as the building blocks to intellectual, social, and identity issues. Teens especially start spending more time with their friends than their family members, and it is their friends that they see as an important source of support. It is from these friendships that a teen's self-perception grows and develops. While friendships can help self-esteem grow, they can also harm a student's level of self-esteem.

Feeling inadequate as a friend, by either not feeling capable of showing support or not having the same level of friendship in return, can lead to problems in classroom participation and social adjustment. Intimate peer support, such as from close friends, is just as beneficial as global peer support, such as from classmates. School and classroom settings can be a factor in building a student's self-perception or esteem since this is where children make most of their peer connections. Creating positive school atmospheres, where students can connect with others, will help them become successful, self-confident students (Caselman, 2007).

According to Leary (1999), trying to reach high self-esteem usually creates different effects on all areas of a student's life from social to academic. Self-esteem is most often lowered by failure, criticism, and rejection. When students have a low self-esteem, research has shown that they can suffer from a range of psychological difficulties such as loneliness, academic failure, and depression. However, extremely high self-esteem is not always advantageous for students. Egertson (2006) asserted that when a student becomes proud instead of just having good self-esteem it can become unhealthy and lead to poor outcomes because they have an exaggerated idea about their abilities. In this case, they may move towards negative or dangerous behaviors and take others with them have an unusually high self-esteem.

Research in psychology has showed that the years from childhood to adolescence make up the critical period for personal formation. While nurturing within the family is the most important factor in early childhood, school progressively gains importance as a determining influence on the individual's self-

esteem. In school, students are constantly evaluating their competence in classroom tasks and performances. Therefore, the school setting can cause issues for students and their level of self-esteem. It can either hurt them or equip them with the tools to maintain a positive level of self-esteem. Students spend such a significant amount of time in school that it is imperative that they are able to build high levels of self-esteem through relationships with their peers and teachers. Accordingly, self-efficacy, which is the perception people have about their competence, is fostered mainly at schools (Bandura, 1987).

Research Problem

The communication and interaction among people are mostly realized through language use. The practicality of this language use is very essential among EFL learners as they are not able to make easy and complete use of language, that is to say they are not professional language users in the case of the foreign language which they are learning. In this regard, the affective factors play a crucial role in learning contexts especially during communication. Learners come to the class with different personality traits and knowledge backgrounds which can influence learning process; among these the factor of dominance and gender need to be emphasized for EFL educators so that they can pay more attention to these factors during classroom interactions. If a learner feels more dominated over others and feels to have control over the topic of a conversation this may affect the performance of other learners, they may get frustrated and inhibited.

It is widely assumed that people control conversations differently. Affective and personal differences in conversational control might demonstrate greater social power and status; this concept is reflected clearly in dominance perspective. The importance of affective factors and dominance in conversational exchanges can be more significant and stimulating in EFL educational contexts, where learners try to use a foreign language in their interactions to express themselves as clearly as possible. The major problem lies in the fact that low self-esteem is one of the problems that can be easily noted in poor and unproductive spoken or written communication. In English classes it can be simply noticed that students' speaking performance is similar because they prefer memorizing sentences and words of others rather than producing their own ones, which can be mostly detected in their low self-esteem or deficiencies in other affective factors. They may think that their speeches lead to what is beyond words and can reveal their characters and language skills.

Purpose and Significance of the Study

Examining these conditions can have useful implications for EFL educators, learners, and scholars. That is to say, participating in a conversation dominated by a learner with high self-esteem can influence the outcomes of language learning process. This study tries to observe the relationship between self-esteem and dominance arrangements in the conversations between EFL learners in ILI language classes.

In learning a foreign language both cognitive and affective factors can play similar roles. However, in recent years the importance of affective issues has become a matter of debate and extensive research among language teachers, linguists, and researchers; and some variables were found as having a high impact on success in EFL learning. One of these affective factors is self-esteem; research has shown that a student who feels good about himself is more likely to succeed. Generally, the outcomes of other studies revealed that self-esteem is an essential variable in educational context; it may affect the success of learners or it may be gained as a result of the educational success.

This study hopes to gain significance in its attempt to help EFL learners to be aware of their needs and the factors that affect learning and help them to recognize the role of self-esteem in stimulating or hindering their speaking performance.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

The present study attempts to answer the following research questions:

Is there any relationship between Iranian female EFL learners' self-esteem and conversational dominance in terms of total spoken words, total spoken turns, and interruptions?

Based on the above mentioned research question and the existing literature on the topic, the following hypothesis was presented:

H1: There is a relationship between Iranian female EFL learners' self-esteem and conversational dominance in terms of total spoken words, total spoken turns, and interruptions.

Method

Participants

The participants of the present study include 10 female advanced and intermediate EFL learners at ILI (Iran Language Institute) of Tabriz. These learners age group was 19-35. The homogeneity of the participants was ensured through the institute's final test scores. They were asked to choose a topic and talk about it in their group; the whole allocated time for the conversations of each of these groups was 45 minutes.

Instrument

An MP3 recorder was used in order to record the conversations among the participants. Furthermore, the topics of the conversations were chosen from *For and Against* (Alexander, 1982) and *Discussion A-Z: A Resource Book of Speaking Activity* (Wallwork, 2012). The topics were selected by the participants and the researcher did not impose her own ideas during topic selection, so that every topic was based on the learners own interest and knowledge.

The other instrument was Coppersmith's (1967) standardized questionnaire of self-esteem. The questionnaire includes 58 questions with 2 options (yes or no) for

each question. In this questionnaire, 8 questions (6,13,20,27,34,41,48,and 55)were “lie detector” type; that is to say, if a participant got more than four scores from these eight questions, this would show that the test had low reliability and the participants tried to show themselves better than what they were in nature. But the scoring way of other questions (2,4,5,10,11,18,19,21,23,24,28,30,32,35,36,47,45, and 57) is different. For yes answers, the participants received one point and for no answers they got no points. The rest of questions were scored reversely. Therefore, the minimum score obtainable from this questionnaire was zero and the maximum score for a participant was 50.

Procedure

In conducting this study, making the formal requirements and getting permission from the institutes and the teachers, were the preliminary phase. For the actual research, the participants were asked to choose the topic of discussion from one of the two resource books offered by the researchers. After topic selection, the learners started to discuss and talk about the topics. The whole process took 45 minutes. During the discussion, the participants’ speaking performance was recorded without interfering in the interaction of the learners. The researcher/teacher was in charge of the discipline of the class and took care of the task of recording the discussions. The aim was to give the students the maximum amount of time and freedom to express their ideas, and more importantly to keep the role of the researcher in dominance patterns in the classroom ineffective and out of the study.

The collected data was transcribed and analyzed in terms of the total number of the spoken words, the number of turn takings and interruptions in both of the same and mixed gender groups to find out conversational dominance of the participants and to clarify whether male participants dominate female learners or not. The Office Word software was used to count the number of words in transcription.

Results

The present study aimed to investigate possible correlation between self-esteem scores and components of conversational dominance in speaking performance. Table 1 shows the descriptive data related to the participants’ self-esteem status. The mean score is 40.2, standard deviation is 5.27, and the skewedness is -0.67; considering self-esteem scores among the participants, the minimum score is 32 and the maximum score 46. According to interpretation offered for Coppersmith questionnaire, people who receive the score of 26 and less are regarded as people with low self-esteem, scores between 27 and 43 are related to medium self-esteem, and scores more than 44 are for people with high self-esteem. As Table 1 shows, the mean score is 40.2, so the average of participants’ self-esteem in this study is medium.

Table 1. Distribution of Learners’ Self-Esteem

Variable	Number	Mean	SD	Skewedness	Minimum	Maximum
Learners’ self-esteem	10	40.2	5.28	-0.67	32	47

The results of Kolmogorov Smirnov test that ensures normal distribution of the variables is demonstrated in Table 2. According to the results, the significance level for all variables is higher than 0.05 which indicates normal distribution; therefore, parametric tests were used to analyze the data.

Table 2. The Results of Kolmogorov Smirnov test of normality of the Variables

Variables	Number	Test	Significance Level
Self-esteem	10	0.73	0.64
Total Spoken Words	10	0.64	0.79
Total Turn Taking	10	0.74	0.63
Total Interruptions	10	0.64	0.8
Conversational Dominance	10	0.56	0.9

The results obtained from Pearson coefficient correlation for the relationship between self-esteem and the three components of conversational dominance are presented in Table 3. The significance level for the relationship between self-esteem and total spoken words is 0.001 which is lower than 0.05 and $r = 0.86$. That is to say, there is direct and very strong significant relationship. Also, linear regression equals 0.73; that is to say, learners' self-esteem can increase total spoken words for 73 percent.

Table 3. The Correlation between Self-Esteem and Conversational Dominance

Variable	Self-esteem			
	N	r	P	R ²
Total Spoken Words	10	0.86	0.001	0.64
Total Turn Taking	10	0.79	0.006	0.62
Total Interruptions	10	0.76	0.01	0.57
Conversational Dominance	10	0.88	0.001	0.77

The results of Pearson coefficient correlation for total turn taking and self-esteem shows that the significance level is 0.006 which is less than 0.05, and $r = 0.79$. Therefore, there is direct and strong significant relationship between these two variables. Also, linear regression equals 0.62; that is to say, learners' self-esteem can determine total turn taking for 62 percent.

The results of the Pearson coefficient correlation for self-esteem and total interruptions shows that the significance level is 0.01 which is lower than 0.05, and $r = 0.76$. Therefore, there is direct and strong significant relationship between these two variables as well. Furthermore, the linear regression equals 0.57; that is to say, learners' self-esteem can increase total turn taking for 57 percent.

Finally, the results of Pearson coefficient correlation for total conversational dominance shows that the significance level is 0.001 which is less than 0.05, and

$r = 0.88$. Therefore, there is direct and very strong significant relationship between these two variables. Also, linear regression equals 0.77; that is to say 77 percent of learners' conversational dominance depends on their self-esteem.

Discussion

Considering the act of language learning many scholars have found out that there are many different factors affecting the language learning process. Generally, these factors have been divided into two major groups of cognitive and affective factors. Most of the educators have seen that learners who are cognitively ready to learn are not prepared affectively. Therefore, emphasizing the affective variables is very vital for learning foreign language (Amini, 2014). Especially, in speaking performance learners need to control and manage their feelings in order to be able to talk fluently and to express themselves effortlessly. One of the most outstanding aspects of affective trait is self-esteem. Self-esteem is an extremely popular construct within the field of psychology and has been associated with virtually many other psychological concepts or domains to account for variations in cognitive performance. The part played by self-esteem sometimes becomes so profound that it may linger on for years and even crawl into the ESL learners' personality and performance when they get into the teaching profession (Kurosh Khanshan & Yousefi, 2015). Thus, the relationship between self-esteem and academic achievement is one that has been regarded by many educators as a well-established fact. The present study was conducted by the aim of investigating the relationship between self-esteem and conversational dominance. The resulted mean score of participants as estimated by Coppersmith's (1967) questionnaire was 40.2, an indication that the EFL learners of this research had medium level of self-esteem. It is expected that learners with low self-esteem may not be able to impose greater conversational dominance during presenting their speaking performance. A high level of correlation and predictability was obtained for Iranian EFL learners' self-esteem measures and the three components of conversational dominance in terms of total spoken words, total spoken turns, and interruptions among the learners.

Based on the findings of the present study, some implications can be drawn for teachers. The results show that self-esteem can play a role in academic achievement of students; this is more influential especially in learning a foreign language. Speaking skill in foreign language learning is a challenging effort, and learners may feel uncomfortable when they are asked to talk using the learnt materials. In learning a foreign language, there is usually more emphasis on speaking performance and learners are expected to talk fluently after passing few courses. Thus, the results of this study can inform teachers about the significance of learners' affective characteristics and their self-esteem in particular. It is evident that low self-esteem can negatively affect the process of learning; so, the findings of this research can be used by educators in identifying the factors affecting the low performance and achievement of learners as one of the affective factors which causes problems for learners is the lack of self-esteem. EFL instructors want to give their students the best possible opportunities to learn and use the target language. Given the findings that dominance may influence learners' experiences in conversational interactions,

teachers may wish to encourage their students to work with interlocutors of a special gender or mixed-gender groups.

On the other hand, the results can have some implications for the EFL learners, as well. By considering the role of self-esteem they can try to improve their own self-esteem in order to perform much better during learning process. Specifically, speaking skill can become more manageable for learners due to the presence of self-esteem. Moreover, self-esteem should be taken into consideration as a serious issue when planning English lessons. EFL teachers should take into consideration the individual differences among students and the different social-psychological background they come from. EFL students who have low self-esteem should be trained to overcome their negative feelings about themselves and look positively at their EFL learning capabilities. EFL teachers should accept students' mistakes as a natural part of learning and encourage trying and risk-taking in English learning.

In further studies, the role and the effect of self-esteem can be investigated in relation to other language skills such as listening comprehension and writing. The present study was conducted among female EFL learners; a similar study can be done among male learners and mixed groups. Self-esteem is not only effective for learners but also it has implications for teachers; it can be argued that teachers with high self-esteem may be more self-confident in their professions so that they can act and teach better in classroom environment. In other studies, the role of self-esteem in the process of teaching and among teachers can be investigated. Also, a study can be conducted about the effect of different teaching techniques on the development of learners' conversational dominance. In addition, methods of attaining and improving self-esteem among students and the effect of these methods on academic achievement can be examined later. One area for investigation could be to investigate the role of teacher's gender in dominating and controlling the EFL classroom interactions and to see whether teachers with opposite gender related to learners can dominate the learners' communication or not. Another research can consider the external outcomes of dominance or power during interactions; it means to study body or facial changes of speakers who try to exert more power and dominance over other partners.

Conclusion

Dominance is an integral part of any relationship, especially conversations and interactions, because it determines how the partners relate to each other and how decisions are made and controlled during interactions. The present study attempted to investigate the relationship between self-esteem and conversational dominance in terms of total spoken words, total turn takings, and interruptions. The results of this study evidently revealed that the EFL learners who participated in this study had medium level of self-esteem as measured by Coppersmith's questionnaire. In order to test the hypothesis, Pearson coefficient correlation was administered. The results showed that there was a significant relationship between self-esteem and conversational dominance and its three components. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that there is a direct and strong relationship between self-esteem and conversational dominance, that is to say, learners who have almost high self-esteem

can act better in presenting their speaking skill and dominate the conversation. Learners with high level of self-esteem are in a better position to impose a conversational dominance in their speech and take more turns than others. They can also interrupt other speakers in order to express themselves. The findings of this study provide further evidence for the pivotal role of affective variables in EFL learners' language performance. In conclusion, self-esteem can help learners to perform well in productive skills and attempt eagerly to improve their academic achievements.

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