The role of self-concept and expectations in academic achievement: a preliminary study

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Abstract: As early career students face new challenges at university, the relationship between second language skills and academic success depends upon self-perception to a greater extent than previously assumed. Up to the moment, most levelling courses have focused on developing students' skills in specific subjects in order to bridge the gap between the knowledge that the high school alumni have and university teachers expect them to possess. Yet, early academic failure remains elevated. For this reason, we have decided to focus our English Degree levelling course on academic strategies, expectations and procedures with the aim to disclose the role of students' self-perception on second language performance in an academic context. We have designed a two-staged method consisting of a survey and a standardized placement test to measure learners' self-perception. The results of both stages are measured by following a mixed method procedure, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses. Results show that there is a close relationship between students' self-concepts, academic expectations, and final outcomes. When the learning of new contents occurs by means of a foreign language, the implications of learners' confidence and their academic awareness are even clearer. Therefore, we conclude that learners' self-concepts, and awareness of their academic expectations should play a key role in initial undergraduate training.

Keywords: self-concept; expectation; second language performance; levelling course; higher education; learning experience.

Introduction and context

First year in Higher Education is always demanding for new students who have to face new challenges regarding schedules, contents, levels, and teachers. In a matter of months, a higher level of maturity and autonomy is required from them as part of their academic success. In many universities, first-year undergraduates are offered an introductory levelling course with the aim of providing an overview of contents and expected learning outcomes. In this regard, we aim to focus on a group of English Studies undergraduates, and to examine the role of academic self-perceptions in learners' second language performance. The notions of self-perception and self-concept are used interchangeably in this paper and refer to the mental image that study subjects possess of themselves as students (Jurkovic, 2013).

Teachers at the University of Malaga have noted a significant gap between the level of knowledge high school alumni are expected to have and actually possess when commencing their university careers. In addition, the teacher-learner dynamics at university places greater emphasis on students as active learners than earlier whereas teachers assume a moderating role. Consequently, first-year students face unexpected difficulties, which in some cases entails early academic failure. In order to decrease the number of first-year dropouts and enhance learning consistency, different degrees have implanted introductory levelling courses to bridge the gap between high-school and university studies.