

The dynamics of an EFL learner's speaking self-concept: insights from self-reported accounts and classroom observation data

A dinâmica do autoconceito da fala de um aluno de EFL: percepções a partir de experiências auto-relatadas e dados de observação em sala de aula

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ABSTRACT: This case study explores the dynamics of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) speaking self-concept of a female university student. The study focuses on the participant's internal and external frames of reference (MERCER, 2011b) to analyze how her EFL speaking self-concept has been constructed throughout her years of English language instruction, and how it is re-constructed and developed in the current course. Findings show that such self-concept originates from beliefs systems, emotions, learner characteristics, previous English language learning context/method, critical experiences and experiences of success/failure using the oral language. Results indicate that critical positive experiences and perceived experiences of success appear to influence positively the learner's self-efficacy beliefs and emotional experiences about the oral task.

KEYWORDS: self-concept; learner's beliefs; learner's emotions; communicative language teaching; foreign language speaking

RESUMO: Este estudo de caso explora a dinâmica do autoconceito da fala de Inglês como Língua Estrangeira (ILE) de uma estudante universitária. O estudo enfoca os quadros de referência interno e externo do participante (MERCER, 2011b) para analisar como seu autoconceito de fala de ILE foi construído ao longo de seus anos de ensino da língua inglesa, e como ele é reconstruído e desenvolvido no curso atual. Os resultados mostram que tal autoconceito origina-se de sistemas de crenças, emoções, características do aluno, contexto método de aprendizagem anterior da língua inglesa, experiências críticas e experiências de sucesso/fracasso usando a linguagem oral. Os resultados indicam que as experiências críticas positivas e as experiências percebidas de sucesso parecem influenciar positivamente as crenças de autoeficácia do aluno e as experiências emocionais sobre a tarefa oral.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: autoconceito; crenças do aluno; emoções do aluno; ensino comunicativo de línguas; produção oral em língua estrangeira



1. Introduction

In Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research, it has been widely acknowledged that the beliefs and emotional experiences that learners construct¹ in relation to language learning play a central role in their learning process (ARAGÃO, 2011; BARCELOS, 2000; KALAJA; BARCELOS, 2003). Everything that students believe and feel about themselves in a specific academic domain, i.e., their academic self-concept(s) (MERCER, 2011b), has been associated with achievement (MARSH; MARTIN, 2011), academic performance (LIU, 2008), motivation (DÖRNYEI, 2009) and attitudes to learning (BURNETT et al., 2003). In the domain of Foreign Language Learning (FLL), several studies have been carried out in the past few years examining the nature and development of learners' self-concept (CSIZÉR; MAGID, 2014; MERCER, 2011a; 2011b; 2015; WADDINGTON, 2019; WALKER, 2015). Particularly in FL speaking, self-concept can be damaged due to a lack of full proficiency in the language because it might make learners feel vulnerable and judged (ARNOLD, 2007) and even anxious (HORWITZ et al., 1986). However, FL speaking self-concept has received little attention and, thus, more research is needed in order to create a more holistic picture of the learner self-concept in the FLL domain.

This article attempts to fill this gap by exploring the EFL speaking self-concept of a first-year university student in an ESP course. By means of self-reported and observational data, the study aims to analyze internal and external frames of reference in the context of foreign language learning (MERCER, 2011b) to gain insight into how EFL speaking self-concept might be formed, developed and even changed. To conclude, the article reflects upon possible pedagogical implications and future directions for research on speaking self-concept in SLA.

2. Self-concept

One's sense of self is composed of numerous interconnected and interacting cognitions, affects and motivations, a constellation (DÖRNYEI, 2010) which contributes significantly to leading learners' behaviors, performances and approaches to learning, especially in language learning, due to its social and interactional nature (MERCER, 2011a). The self has been studied through various self-related terms which are often difficult to distinguish from each other, mainly self-esteem, self-concept and self-efficacy, the former being the most affective and broad and the latter being the most cognitive and task-specific (MERCER, 2011b). Self-concept has been widely defined as "a self-description judgement that includes an evaluation of competence and the feelings of self-worth associated with the judgement in question" (PAJARES; SCHUNK, 2005, p. 105). Although the importance of self-concept has been highlighted in literature (both in SLA and in other fields), its picture remains incomplete due to scarce empirical research (RUBIO, 2014). Existent studies show that self-concept plays a primary role in all learning situations, and it is associated with many educational gains, such as achievement (MARSH; MARTIN, 2011), academic performance (LIU, 2008), motivation (DÖRNYEI, 2009; ECCLES; WIGFIELD, 2002) and attitudes and approaches to learning (BURNETT et al., 2003).

¹ In this study, beliefs and emotions are conceptualized as contextually, psychologically and socially constructed, rather than as automatic responses to external stimuli (see BARRETT, 2017).

Individuals with a high self-concept in a specific domain tend to have an orientation towards self-improvement, whereas those with a low self-concept usually have a self-protective orientation and try to avoid failure (BAUMEISTER, 1999). A domain generally refers to a subject domain, as self-concept research has moved from a unidimensional perspective (i.e., one general self-concept) to a more complex multidimensional model (SHAVELSON et al., 1976) which views individuals as holding separate self-concepts in different domains (academic or non-academic). Academic self-concept refers to a learner's self-perception and assessment of competence about their academic abilities (MARSH; CRAVEN, 2006). The study of academic self-concept is relevant because, as Arnold (2007) points out, low self-concept makes the learner split the energy between the task and an excessive worry about one's self-perceived lack of ability, which results in a less motivating and effective experience.

Apart from being multifaceted, self-concept is frequently regarded as hierarchical in nature (MARSH; SHAVELSON, 1985), i.e., as comprising several domains, although findings from MERCER (2011a; 2011b; 2011c; 2015) suggest that self-concept is best conceptualized through complex dynamic systems perspectives, as change occurs even in apparently stable systems and it is the result of an ongoing interaction between cognitive, affective, social and environmental factors. Therefore, "there is not a fixed or static self but only a current self-concept constructed from one's social experiences" (MARKUS; WURF, 1987, p. 306). Research has demonstrated that self-concept is both stable and dynamic, and this dynamic stability (MERCER, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c) is explained because while the individual uses internal and external frames of reference (MARSH, 1986) to form and develop their self-concepts, the notion of personality – i.e., "the *intraindividual* organization of experience and behavior" (ASENDORPF, 2002, p. 1, emphasis in original) – also implies some degree of stability or equilibrium (NOWAK et al., 2005).

2.1 Self-concept and speaking self-concept in FLL

In the recent years, self-concept, and the notion of self in general, has gained momentum in second and foreign language learning, and research has demonstrated the existence of a separate self-concept for each language (YEUNG; WONG, 2004; MERCER, 2011b). In line with work from general education, self-related constructs have been found to play a key role in foreign language learning, language use, achievement and motivation (ARNOLD; BROWN, 1999; DÖRNYEI; USHIODA, 2009; LIU, 2008; MERCER, 2011b; WADDINGTON, 2019; WALKER, 2015). Nevertheless, more studies are needed to grasp how learners construct their sense of self throughout their foreign language learning process (CSIZÉR; MAGID, 2014).

In FLL, the study of self-concept is closely related to learner's beliefs and emotions, areas which have received increasing interest in the past few years (BARCELOS, 2015; DEWAELE; MACINTYRE, 2014; DEWAELE et al., 2018; KALAJA; BARCELOS, 2003; MACINTYRE et al., 2016). In this sense, Williams et al. (2015) state that learners' self-concepts in the FLL domain are composed of a combination of cognitive beliefs and affective responses. Mercer (2011b) points out that affective responses appeared regularly throughout her dataset and had connections with factors that emerged in the study, both internal (comparisons across domains, beliefs systems and affective reactions) and external (social comparisons, feedback from significant others, perceived experiences of success/failure, previous language learning/use experiences and critical experiences). Affect seems to be particularly important in the foreign language

learning context, as self-concept can be damaged due to a lack of full command in the language since it sometimes makes learners feel vulnerable and judged (ARNOLD, 2007). This is especially the case in the oral domain, probably due to the “saliency and high ‘public visibility’ of oral performance” (MERCER, 2011b, p. 162). Work on FL anxiety (e.g., HORWITZ et al., 1986) demonstrates how learners tend to be anxious when speaking in a language which they do not fully master, usually due to fear and embarrassment about making mistakes (HEWITT; STEPHENSON, 2012; LIU; JACKSON, 2008). Therefore, having a low FL speaking self-concept might imply a ‘flight’ response in which the learner avoids speaking in the FL in class (YOSHIDA, 2013).

Research has shown that learners also hold different self-concepts for specific verbal skills, i.e., reading, writing, speaking and listening (ARENS; JANSEN, 2016; LAU et al., 1999). Although some studies have been conducted in relation to self-concept and the different skills, research on speaking self-concept is – to the best of my knowledge – virtually non-existent, with the exception of Diert-Boté and Martín-Rubió (2022), Yoshida (2013) and some parts of Mercer’s (2011b; 2015) research. These studies show that learners’ speaking self-concepts also seem to be influenced by internal and external frames of reference (MERCER, 2011b), including affective factors (DIERT-BOTÉ; MARTIN-RUBIÓ, 2022; YOSHIDA, 2013), and that, despite the unique nature of each learner’s self-system, they can gradually change depending on their speaking experiences. Therefore, this paper aims to fill the research gap on EFL speaking self-concept in order to (a) gain insight into the construct’s formation and development, and (b) consider potential pedagogical implications for the ELL classroom. The study intends to provide an answer to the following two questions:

RQ 1: What is the learner’s EFL speaking self-concept and how does it appear to change (or not) along the ESP course?

RQ 2: What are the factors that play a role in EFL speaking self-concept formation and development?

3. Methodology

Self-concept has traditionally been studied within the quantitative paradigm, but there is a need for research approaches which understand the learner in a more complex and holistic sense (USHIODA, 2009). Elliott (2005, p. 173) notes that “qualitative approaches allow for a conception of the self as being socially constructed [as well as] constantly revised and negotiated”. Within qualitative research, the case study was considered the most suitable method to analyze and comprehend the dynamics of EFL speaking self-concept, as it enables in-depth, context-dependent knowledge and meaningful understanding of particular real life events (LUCK et al., 2006). Although case studies tend to be criticized due to lack of representativeness and difficulty in generalization (FLYVBJERG, 2006), it is important to bear in mind that a substantial number of thoroughly well-conducted case studies is necessary in order to make a discipline effective (KUHN, 1987 apud FLYVBJERG, 2006).

3.1 Context and participant

This study is part of a larger research project which analyzed and compared two English language learning methodologies (translanguaging approach and traditional monolingual approach) in two groups² of a first-year English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in a Social Sciences degree at a Catalan university during the spring semester of the 2016-2017 academic year. Despite their differences, both methodologies used a communicative language teaching approach, which aims at engaging learners in communication to help them develop their communicative competence, as opposed to simply controlling syntactical and phonological patterns (SAVIGNON, 2002). For this reason, authentic materials that promoted both oral and written communicative competence were employed in this course, and students usually worked in small groups or pairs. The tasks assessed for the course were: an oral presentation (20%), a sales pitch (20%), a formal business letter (20%), a final exam (20%), a booklet reading exam (10%) and a portfolio (10%).

The participant in this study is Tatiana (a pseudonym), a 19 year-old first-year female student enrolled in the aforementioned ESP course. After being explained the research project, she agreed to participate in it and provided her written consent to use her data for research purposes. Tatiana was born in a south-eastern town of Romania and came to Catalonia (Spain) at the age of nine. She had never studied English in Romania, and when she arrived in the new country she had to invest her time and effort in learning both Catalan and Spanish. Such ‘investment’ (NORTON PEIRCE, 1995) allowed the learner to have access to a wider range of resources (both symbolic and material) in her adoptive land, and, as pointed out by Norton Peirce (1995), it might have influenced her own social identity over time due to the engagement in new linguistic and social practices. It was not until a year later that Tatiana started with English, approximately four years after her classmates. This participant was purposefully selected for two main reasons. Firstly, this participant offered an information-rich case that facilitated an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under analysis (WAN, 2019), the EFL speaking self-concept, as this learner’s contributions were particularly abundant, detailed and elaborated. Secondly, my attention was directed towards Tatiana because of the difficulties and uneasiness that she reported regarding the teaching method employed, as she showed a much deeper concern than her peers about having to speak in English publicly. Therefore, Tatiana’s thorough and multiple contributions about her struggle speaking in English provided insightful data to analyze and explore EFL speaking self-concept.

3.2 Data collection and analysis

The study employs a triangulation of data sorts, which permits gaining information at multiple levels and going beyond the knowledge acquired by one single approach or data sort, hence ensuring more quality research (FLICK, 2018). In research of the self, various and complementary approaches have to be effectively mixed in order to achieve a more complete understanding of the self (MERCER; WILLIAMS, 2014). Data were obtained from (1) Tatiana’s contributions in two group discussions (GD) with eight students (the same in the pre- and post-). In these discussions, students were asked by members of the research team

² The teachers of the two ESP groups were members of the research team of the project.

about their experiences in the course by focusing on the class materials, evaluation, activities, language use and so forth. The first group discussion (coded 'pre-GD' in the excerpts) was conducted in March 2017 (week 7), and the second one (coded 'post-GD') in May 2017 (week 15); both were performed in Catalan and have been translated into English due to space constraints; (2) Tatiana's behavior in class through the recordings of six class sessions (weeks 3, 5, 8, 10, 12 and 14) of 1 hour and 30 minutes hours or 2 hours (depending on the class duration). The sessions were video-recorded with two cameras (one at the front and one at the back of the classroom) and several audio-recorders distributed among the students' desks; and (3) Tatiana's response to an open-ended question from a questionnaire (coded 'post-Q') passed in week 18 with the statement "Indicate some aspect(s) you remember positively of [Name of the subject]. Think about a lesson you liked and explain why it was good".

In order to understand the complexities and dynamics of an EFL learner's speaking self-concept, a grounded theory approach was adopted, as this methodology contributes to the elaboration and development of a theory or a phenomenon from the perceptions and experiences of the participants (CORBIN; STRAUSS, 2015). Firstly, the pre- and the post-group interviews were fully transcribed and all Tatiana's contributions related to speaking aspects were assembled in a single Word document – chronologically and thematically. The data generated from the interviews and the response from the questionnaire were analyzed using Initial Coding, an approach to coding which allows to remain open to all possible theoretical directions (SALDAÑA, 2015). As dynamics cannot be profoundly explored taking two fixed points in time (SALDAÑA, 2003), the six videos from the class sessions were viewed and the participant's audio-recorder was listened to carefully in order to have a more complete understanding of EFL speaking self-concept. Her contributions in class were transcribed multimodally following Norris' (2004, p. 59) conventions, including not only the words uttered and the pauses, but also kinesics – gestures, head movement and gaze (NORRIS, 2004). Notes were taken also on the number of times she spoke aloud in each class session. Ultimately, the three data sorts were contrasted chronologically in order to trace the participant's EFL speaking self-concept dynamics during the course.

4. Findings

The findings present self-reported and classroom-based data simultaneously and are displayed chronologically in weeks in order to explore the learner's EFL speaking self-concept dynamics.

Weeks 3 and 5

The first part of the class in week 3 consists of watching online oral presentations (e.g., a presentation by Steve Jobs) and identifying positive and negative aspects, and of reading texts about public speaking to get ideas for the oral presentation that students will have to give in weeks 16-17. Tatiana is attentive, listens to the teacher and works on the different class activities. She displays a relaxed attitude that transmits comfort: she smiles, laughs with her classmates/friends, speaks with them about class-related aspects and about their lives, usually in Catalan, but sometimes in English. Half an hour after the class started, Tatiana is working with

her friend and classmate, Iria, who is reading aloud a text; when it is Tatiana's turn, she says: "do you want to read? I'm very bad at reading aloud in English [translation]" while grimacing. Tatiana's belief that she is "very bad" at reading in English aloud points to the fact that she does not feel very confident with her spoken English, as reading aloud could be interpreted as a part of the speaking domain. Despite this statement, Tatiana volunteers to answer the teacher's questions two times. One of the episodes unfolds as follows:

Excerpt 1 (week 3/1:20:48)

Teacher	can any of you please summarize the main points of this webpage?
Tatiana	(scratches head) (looks at computer) em::: (1) yes.
Teacher	if it's similar-
Tatiana	-e yes (0.2) there are mm they present e (plays with hair) (looks at computer) some phases to present the information the body to summarize to to do questions (rubbing hands) (reading from the computer) and and that.

The excerpt above illustrates how Tatiana, even from the very beginning of the course, is willing to participate in class, even if that implies speaking in English in front of her classmates. It has to be pointed out, though, that the multimodal analysis reveals some nervousness: scratching, playing with the hair and rubbing hands can be interpreted as signs of nervousness and uncertainty (PEASE; PEASE, 2004), something which can be further perceived by her gaze, as she avoids looking at the teacher.

Two minutes after the interaction in Excerpt 1 takes place, the teacher tells students that they have to self-record an improvised two-minute oral presentation and that they can reuse the version that they did the other day. When Tatiana hears that, she exclaims, staring at the teacher: "*¡ahí va!* [oh my gosh!]" and several students turn around to look at her, disconcerted; she asks to her classmates if that activity is worth 10% of the final mark, but nobody answers, and she starts typing very fast, extremely concentrated. Therefore, whereas Tatiana seems to be relaxed and talkative during the first part of the session, her emotional state appears to change radically into one of tension and anxiety when the oral presentation is brought up.

In the class from week 5, Tatiana's behavior resembles that of week 3. Contrary to the lesson observed in week 3, in this class the activities do not deal with oral presentations, but, rather, with writing formal business letters. In that class session, there is an alternation between hard work and more relaxed periods in which she chatters and laughs with her friends, perhaps due to the non-threatening topic of the class (it involves writing, not speaking). She volunteers a couple of times by correcting activities without the teacher explicitly asking her to do so, and her responses are similar to the one from Excerpt 1 above: they are rather short and to the point, and her non-verbal behavior while speaking reveals a certain degree of nervousness (she tends to scratch and to avoid staring at the teacher), as in the previous week.

Week 7

In week 7, the first group discussion takes place with eight students (Tatiana included) to discuss course-related aspects, and the excerpts presented in this section belong to the pre-group discussion (pre-GD). Tatiana's contributions tend to revolve around the oral presentation task, although sometimes she also refers to speaking in broader terms. Hence, this learner expresses negative self-views and repeated verbalizations of uncertainty and anxiety related, specifically, to the oral presentation task, which is part of Tatiana's EFL speaking self-concept:

Excerpt 2 (pre-GD)

All the people that go to academies³ and so on I guess that they are more used to speaking in English, but I find it very hard, especially in an oral presentation because I'm very shy, I mean, I learn it by heart and when I'm there in front of the class I go blank

Tatiana reports that speaking in English in public makes her feel insecure and anxious (“I go blank”) and she holds the belief that the task is “very hard”, so she adopts a memorization strategy in order to face the situation. This is especially the case in oral presentations, as she explains in Excerpt 2, and as it could also be deduced from the oral presentation episode in week 3. She attributes her uncertain EFL speaking self-concept to two main aspects: firstly, to the fact that she is not used to speaking in English because, unlike her classmates, she has never attended language academies. This social comparison also shows that she does not evaluate her speaking skills positively in relation to her classmates, which might partly explain her anxiety (LYONS, 2014). Secondly, Tatiana attributes her uncertain EFL self-concept to her shyness. The self-belief of being shy is a non-academic self-concept that arises from the domain of personality and which seems to penetrate into other domains, like the domain of EFL speaking self-concept. In connection with her shy self-belief, she also mentions:

Excerpt 3 (pre-GD)

It is very important to know how to present something in front of the people for the future and so, but the thing is that I don't like at all recording myself, and taking pictures of myself and speaking aloud in front of people [pants] is very hard for me, I'm very shy.

This self-belief of shyness appears to be deeply ingrained in her perceived personality and might be a central, core belief (HARTER, 2006), as it affects other aspects of her life apart from speaking in public, such as self-recording or taking pictures of herself. In turn, this belief plays a relevant role in Tatiana's emotional response towards speaking in English in public, as she conceives it as something strongly negative (she “doesn't like it at all”). This excerpt also demonstrates the Tatiana's internal struggle during the ESP course: on the one hand, she believes that learning how to present properly is important for her future but, on the other hand, she does not want to present precisely because she views this type of task as “very hard” and as anxiety-provoking. Despite this, she shows a determination not to quit, and she is aware that she will end up presenting: “practicing little by little is good for me, and I know I will do the oral presentation anyway, so...” (pre-GD).

As the two excerpts above suggest, Tatiana's self-belief of shyness is one important factor which accounts for her uncertainty in her EFL speaking self-concept. Another influential factor appears to be her previous English language learning (ELL) context and method and her ELL beliefs. In the excerpt below, Tatiana explains the method through which she has learnt English throughout her life, which could be classified as more traditional and grammar-focused:

³ ‘Academies’ here refer to private institutions which some students attend to receive extra English language lessons.

Excerpt 4 (pre-GD)

- Tatiana I'm missing something... we've always done (.) I know it sounds very out dated but I've always learnt like this: theory practice theory practice (.) and now I don't have the theory and I have to go to class and listen and understand what I can.
- Researcher when you say that you've learnt you mean that you've always done that or that you have really learnt by doing that?
- Tatiana yes (.) I've learnt by doing that, well until now I had always done well and in Batxillerat I had quite good marks and now I've plummeted (.) well, I've only done one exam so we'll see in the last exam if I've learnt or if I haven't (.) but...

Despite the fact that Tatiana had to learn several languages when she arrived in Catalonia and that she did not attend any English language academies, her story seemed to be one of success: she received good marks and she had done well along the years of English instruction with a grammar-based method. Nevertheless, she is experiencing a period of transition or adaptation, as this subject is not grammar-focused; Tatiana feels that she is “missing something” because her ELL foundations (theory/grammar) have been replaced by others which prioritize communication. She now compares herself with her past self and feels that she has experienced a setback, which she attributes to her subjective interpretation of the marks (according to her she has plummeted), although at that point she had only taken one exam. In the same line, she expresses that “you learn more with a book and doing exercises” and “recording the video, uploading something, I don't improve much, I don't learn anything” (pre-GD). Based on her previous language learning experiences and the methods she believed worked for her, Tatiana has developed this belief in the need for theory (grammar) and practice. Her belief in this method and her self-belief of shyness are fundamental to understand her preference for a traditional ELL and it can subsequently be interpreted as a justification for her distaste for oral tasks.

Furthermore, Tatiana's characteristics as an English language learner seem to be important to understand her feeling of uncertainty about her EFL speaking self-concept:

Excerpt 5 (pre-GD)

I don't move from my comfort zone, we don't move forward and I want to learn more to be able to, I don't know, when we are out there in real life... I guess that we will wise up but... we have to start now

As a learner, she has a strong sense of agency/autonomy, as she wants to be in control of her language learning process and wants to keep advancing in her learning, as seen in the excerpt above; similarly, she says: “I've never had private lessons or gone to an academy yet, but I learn on my own” (pre-GD) and “I watch films and so on and you always learn something” (pre-GD). Interestingly, she claims that with this subject she is not moving from her comfort zone, although it is precisely because she is doing so that she is experiencing this period of uncertainty. Tatiana also has clear language learning goals (to be able to use the language in “real life”). Ultimately, Tatiana is very demanding of herself, hard-working (as it can be seen from the

classroom data) and quite perfectionist, as she wants to redo all the videos because she was reading instead of improvising given that “it is difficult to do everything perfectly and to speak naturally in the video” (pre-GD). Having these characteristics in her past ELL context had worked well for her, but in the new learning context she feels that even though she strives earnestly, the results are not the expected ones, which help explain her frustration and uncertainty.

Lastly, previous critical experiences presenting also seem to be fairly influential in the construction of her EFL speaking self-concept:

Excerpt 6 (pre-GD)

I promise you, ask [name of the previous ESP subject teacher], poor thing, because I suffered a lot... the pendrive didn't work and I started to get nervous [laughs nervously] the words wouldn't come out, then I started talking and when I looked at the teacher I went blank... I thought 'shit, here we go again...' the paper was two tables away. I don't know where to start or how to start, but this is my problem, the class in general is OK with that... so I'll get by.

Tatiana's vivid description gives the impression that she is reliving this moment. This experience has a negative emotional significance for her and she probably perceives it as a failure, although she does not explicitly voice it. However, it has to be noted that, first of all, the fact that she remembers this episode in so much detail indicates that it is likely to have exerted a considerable impact on her; moreover, the way she narrates this passage and the negative connotations in the words that she uses indicate that this impact was far from positive: she considers that she has a “problem”, and that she “suffered a lot” during that oral presentation because she was feeling so anxious that she forgot everything. However, this does not seem to be an isolated case (“here we go again”), which implies that she has gone through a situation like this more than once, a repetition which might also contribute to the perception of failure. Nevertheless, at the end, she states that she will “get by”, which indicates that she is determined to do the oral presentation anyways, something which she had mentioned already before. This type of critical experiences is fundamental because they act as predictors for future emotional experiences constructed in similar situations, in this case in oral presentations (BARRETT, 2017): Tatiana might believe that if she has never succeeded in oral presentations and she has always suffered from anxiety and experienced negative emotions while doing them, this pattern is likely to continue in future similar situations.

Week 8

Despite the negative experiences related to speaking that Tatiana shared the previous week in the pre-focus group discussion, her degree of class participation is far from low. In the class session from week 8, learners did not have to prepare any part of the oral presentation, contrary to the session observed in week 3; rather, students had to watch a video about foreign students presenting their universities in order to obtain ideas for their own oral presentation. During that class, she contributes several times aloud, four of them voluntarily. Moreover, in comparison to the behavior shown in weeks 3 and 5, she seems much more confident when speaking in front of the class. This is one of the excerpts that demonstrate that:

Excerpt 7 (week 8/01:35:46)

Teacher	which aspects did they emphasize?
Tatiana	that it's a small university (looks at teacher)
Teacher	a small university:
Tatiana	yes, and young and e (looks at teacher)
Teacher	young yes
Tatiana	fif- e fiv- fifty-five percent of the students e they are from abroad so (closes eyes) (smiles) (looks at teacher)
Teacher	okay so half of the [students are-
Tatiana	[and I think that more classes are in English (0.5) I think (looks at teacher)

Tatiana's non-verbal behavior is completely different here than in previous class episodes: she does not scratch, rub her hands or twirls her hair, and she keeps eye contact with the teacher. In her third turn, there is a moment of confusion when saying the number "fifty-five" and she closes her eyes to concentrate, but right after she finds the correct word she smiles and looks again at the teacher. Moreover, Tatiana answers the teacher's question straight away, without hesitation, and contributes a total of three times to provide a more elaborated answer; she also appears to have clearer ideas, to the point that she even interrupts the teacher to put them forward.

Weeks 10, 12 and 14

In this final class excerpt from week 10, one month before the end of the course, Tatiana displays, yet again, a more secure attitude when speaking in English aloud in class than in week 3. In this case, it is the teacher who asks Tatiana to correct an activity:

Excerpt 8 (week 10/00:51:52)

Teacher	Tatiana (0.2) number two
Tatiana	geography: it's one of the most attractive characteristic for the: international (scratches neck) (looks at computer)
Teacher	okay
Tatiana	I found that em e countries in north (points upwards) Europe are more attractive

(looks at teacher)

Teacher mhm

Tatiana and the investment is in the same point e if you have more more investment to: the university (2) a- and the same with the competition, the local competition if there are more than one university in the city

(looks at teacher)

Teacher okay

Tatiana e if they are more competitive (1) then more demand

Even if this interaction is not initiated by Tatiana herself, she is still able to provide a quick, lengthy and detailed response. Despite some minor aspects that reveal hesitation and nervousness (scratching neck, use of fillers and two pauses), Tatiana replies immediately, with long turns (especially the third one) and rather fluently. Furthermore, her gaze is directed towards the teacher (as in Excerpt 7), except at the beginning, when she checks her notes. It has to be noted that, especially in her third contribution, Tatiana is able to formulate a precise and long answer while keeping eye contact with the teacher and without even looking at her notes. This type of contributions (both voluntary and teacher-initiated) can be found as well in weeks 12 and 14, and her non-verbal communication is very similar to the example from week 10.

Week 15

In week 15, the second post-group discussion (post-GD) is conducted, with the same students as in the pre-, and therefore extracts from the post-group discussion will be presented in this section. Data reveals that despite Tatiana's apparent relaxed and more comfortable behavior speaking in class, her EFL speaking self-concept still seems to be undergoing a phase of uncertainty and she keeps struggling to readjust to the new context. The oral tasks, and particularly the oral presentation and its preparatory activities, seem to be an uphill climb to Tatiana: as she herself expresses in the post-GD, she is "starting to get really overwhelmed" and "stressed out" with the subject. She also complains about having to record a lot of videos of herself speaking because "it is very hard and tiresome for me, and I don't like doing them" (post-GD).

One of the researchers asks students if they have perceived some improvement in their oral skills, to which she responds: "no, I haven't improved yet. I try to, but I find it harder every time" (post-GD). On the contrary, one of her classmates mentions that practicing for the oral presentation has aided him to overcome the embarrassment of speaking in English in public, to which she replies: "I'll never do that". Tatiana not only sees her present self as incapable of overcoming embarrassment, but she does not imagine her possible future self to be capable of doing it either. Possible selves are portrayed in the mind in the same way as their here-and-now self, which means that they are a reality for the individual, just as their present self (MARKUS; NURIUS, 1986). In her statement, Tatiana's possible future self appears to depict what she is afraid of becoming in the future (DÖRNYEI, 2009), which shows once more the negative views she holds of her English speaking abilities with regards to the oral presentation (both in the present and in the future). She even claims that she knows exactly how much the oral tasks count for the final mark to see "how many points [she] would lose" (post-GD). These beliefs of incapability affect the beliefs she holds about herself as

a learner and her speaking skills, and she does not appear to conceive change as possible. Here, Tatiana refers to the grades in the subject (as in Excerpt 4), which demonstrates that she still feels uncertain of her speaking self-concept and that she has the need to reinforce it. This also suggests that struggling to obtain high grades in the oral tasks, particularly in the oral presentation, is a challenge which would contribute to that.

Week 18

In weeks 16-17, the students performed the oral presentations in front of the teacher and the classmates. Due to ethical issues, we do not have access to Tatiana's oral presentation mark, as it was part of the course assessment but not part of the dataset of the research project. However, the marks obtained for the research project indicate an improvement in all of them, including her oral performance (sales pitch), although her marks were already quite good from the beginning. Despite not having Tatiana's oral presentation mark, her response to the post-question from the questionnaire is even more valuable than the mark itself, as the actual grade is perhaps less influential than the self-perception of what the grade means to her. In that post-question, students had to indicate the most positive aspect(s) of the ESP course and provide an explanation. Tatiana's answer about the most positive aspect was as follows:

Excerpt 9 (post-Q)

The oral presentation, because I have put a lot of effort to improve the mark with respect to the presentation in the first semester, and I have finally achieved it and I see that I can do it now. However, it is still hard and embarrassing for me to speak in public, even more in a language which I don't get to fully master.

This question was broad enough so that students could mention any aspect of the ESP course. Considering Tatiana's answers in the pre- and post- group discussions, it was inconceivable that she could choose the oral presentation as the most positive aspect of the whole subject, especially considering that the ESP subject made her very uncertain of her EFL speaking self-concept. In the end, her subjective experience of success is what helps her transform her emotional state towards the task (from extremely negative to positive) and to change her previous negative self-efficacy beliefs into beliefs of capability: "I have finally achieved it and I see that I can do it now". Although she had not overcome the fear of speaking in public, the fact that she attributes success to her own effort rather than to external factors might contribute to a higher sense of control about future outcomes and to increased positive affect and confidence (BAUMGARDNER, 1990).

Drawing the complete picture

Tatiana displays more positive levels of confidence speaking in class than in the oral presentation scenario, which might be attributed to some of the factors found by Mercer (2015): she always sat in the same area of the classroom, she always worked with the same people (who are her friends), and, due to her fear of speaking assessment, she might conceive the class as a much more welcoming space. In addition, another essential factor seems to be that Tatiana's uncertainties when speaking in English are rooted specifically in the oral presentation task, rather than in the EFL speaking domain as a whole.

After having analyzed multimodally the seven sessions and having compared the self-reported and the classroom-based data, Tatiana does not seem very concerned about all oral tasks (e.g., she rarely mentions the sales pitch) or about speaking in English in general. About this last point, she does not seem to display an attitude of an anxious speaker when having to speak aloud in English in class. The classroom dataset suggests that Tatiana was not an anxious EFL speaker even at the beginning of the course (although she experienced a certain degree of nervousness), because she volunteered several times in all the classes with rather long contributions (although those from the first classes tended to be shorter). In fact, compared to her classmates, she is one of the most active students and the majority of her contributions are voluntary (two or three per class approximately); what is more, the multimodal analysis indicates an evolution towards a much certain EFL speaking self-concept as the course advanced, given that she displayed a more relaxed and secure behavior when speaking aloud and a decrease in hesitation and restless movements.

Therefore, her problem seems to be very task-specific and her beliefs of incapability are better conceived as self-efficacy beliefs. If Tatiana had negative self-efficacy beliefs in every oral task and situation, the evolution would have probably been a more difficult process, as it would have implied, for instance, perceiving success in other tasks (sales pitch) and communicative situations (like speaking in class). Nonetheless, her negative self-efficacy beliefs appear to affect the whole system, resulting in an overall low EFL speaking self-concept. This was explicitly seen in statements like “I’m very bad at reading aloud in English” (week 3, to her classmate Iria), “speaking in English is very hard for me” (Excerpt 2) and “speaking aloud in front of people is very hard for me” (Excerpt 3), as well as when she mentioned that she did not like recording videos of herself speaking because “it was very hard and tiresome” for her, as well as when she denies having improved in oral skills in general.

It has to be noted that although Tatiana refers to the English speaking domain in general, she might be in fact referring to, or thinking exclusively about, the oral presentation, which is the task that worries her the most, as shown by the analysis. The explanation for this low and uncertain EFL speaking self-concept is likely to dwell in Tatiana’s excessive preoccupation with the oral presentation, which makes her feel so insecure that she believes that she is not good at speaking in English in general. After the success in the oral presentation, Tatiana reports a positive change in her affective conceptualization of the task and in her self-efficacy beliefs, which might eventually affect her overall EFL speaking self-concept.

5. Discussion

This research has contributed both theoretically and methodologically to the exploration of self-concept in the EFL speaking domain. The combination of data from group interviews and the class observations have permitted to gain insight into the learner’s beliefs, emotions and actions and to construct a holistic portrayal of her speaking self-concept. In connection to this, Larsen-Freeman and Cameron (2008) highlight that observing classroom practices rises ecological validity, as in complex dynamic systems context is regarded as inseparable from the system analyzed.

Interestingly, these two data sources illustrate the existence of ambivalence in second or foreign language learning situations (MACINTYRE; SERROUL, 2014), as the learner might feel both willing to

speak (as shown in classroom data) but also restrained by anxiety (as expressed in group discussions). In turn, these results echo Mercer (2015), given that levels of anxiety seem to be lower in class than in a speaking task where the student is being observed. Furthermore, the analysis of classroom observational data suggests that participant's incapability beliefs were specific of the oral presentation rather than shared across other communicative situations; yet, the participant's serious problems with this specific task appear to have destabilized the whole EFL speaking self-concept, resulting in a low overall EFL-speaking self-concept. This study further demonstrates that the line that separates the "different layers of the self" (MERCER, 2015), such as a self-efficacy (task-specific construct) and self-concept (a more global construct), is blurry and that they are so strongly related that at some points they become indistinguishable (MARSH et al., 2019).

Several internal and external factors found in Mercer (2011b) have been identified as playing a role in the creation and development of the EFL speaking self-concept: beliefs systems (about oneself and about ELL), emotional experiences, English language learner characteristics (perfectionist, hard-working), previous ELL context and method, social comparison with peers, critical negative/positive experiences presenting, and perceived experiences of failure/success. A positive critical experience presenting, self-perceived as an experience of success, has triggered a change in beliefs systems (at a self-efficacy level) and in the emotions constructed towards the task. The change, however, is only partial, highlighting the dynamic stability (MERCER, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012, 2015) of EFL speaking self-concept, as there seems to be both dynamic and stable dimensions depending on their centrality (HARTER, 2006). Some dimensions appear to be less malleable, such as task-specific negative emotions like embarrassment and anxiety and the belief that speaking in English in public is extremely hard, which seem to be closely linked to her "shy" core belief.

Contrarily, dynamics were observed in the classroom-based data, as along the six sessions observed, the learner seemed to have experienced a decrease in her level of nervousness when speaking in the target language in class. A possible reason for that could be the fact that the learner did not conceive the classroom as a threatening situation or context in comparison to the oral presentation. Similarly, more peripheral aspects connected to the actual ability – i.e., self-efficacy beliefs – seem to be more susceptible to change (HARTER, 2006; MERCER, 2012), even in such a short time lapse (15 weeks). The results show that changing the global self-concept is perhaps too complex an exercise; yet, this change can occur more easily at a task-specific level, as it can be perceived in Tatiana's post-question, by succeeding in a task that is particularly relevant for the learner. The learner's attributed relevance, or value, to a specific task (such as the oral presentation in Tatiana's case) has been employed in theories like expectancy-value (ECCLES, 1983) or control-value (PEKRUN, 2006) as being directly correlated to the learner's motivation, academic achievement and type of emotions felt (positive or negative). Therefore, if modifications in self-efficacy beliefs occur in tasks to which the learner attaches high value, and taking into consideration that the different layers of the self are nested and reciprocally influence each other, such change might eventually affect the whole system of the self (MERCER, 2015).

Ultimately, although many studies have already highlighted the affective dimension of self-concept in general (BONG; SKAALVIK, 2003; PAJARES; SCHUNK, 2005), and also in the EFL self-concept (DIERT-BOTÉ; MARTIN-RUBIÓ, 2022; MERCER, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c, 2012, 2015), the findings from the current study confirm the importance of emotions in FL learning, as it has already been mentioned by several authors (e.g., ARNOLD; BROWN, 1999; DEWAELE; MACINTYRE, 2014; DEWAELE et al., 2018), and, more specifically, this research shows this is especially true in the domain of speaking. These

emotions seem to play a central role in the learner's assessment of her own ability, results which resonate with those obtained by Waddington (2019) and Yoshida (2013). It is well documented that willingness to communicate (WTC) is associated with self-esteem and self-perceived communication competence (HABIB ZADE; HASHEMI, 2014) and that learners tend to experience negative emotions like anxiety when speaking, especially in front of their peers (KANG, 2005; LYONS, 2014). Therefore, these negative emotions, together with other fixed self-beliefs (like the belief of being shy) might impede a change in FL speaking self-concept, for which learners' self-confidence in the FL communicative competence is essential (YASHIMA, 2002).

5.1 Pedagogical implications

Educators need to be aware of the fact that learners carry their own learning experiences that explain their current EFL speaking self-concept and that, whilst it is open to change, this development is not likely to occur globally, but rather at a task-specific level. Teachers should help learners to develop positive and realistic self-concepts (MERCER, 2012) and to bear in mind the importance of boosting learners' speaking self-concepts by working on particular oral tasks while helping them progress. Furthermore, as Arnold (2007) points out, English language teachers should be aware that learners would benefit from more feasible goals in their language learning process in order to avoid frustration and negative self-beliefs and, on the whole, general low self-concepts. This is particularly noteworthy for speaking tasks, as learners often feel judged by their peers and tend to evaluate themselves negatively in relation to their classmates (LYONS, 2014). Educators should thus create a positive atmosphere in which respect is the top priority and in which students feel safer and less exposed to judgments. Ultimately, it has to be noted that although the foreign languages curriculum in Catalonia is communicative in nature, communicative approaches do not seem to be the rule in the classrooms (DIERT-BOTÉ; MARTIN-RUBIÓ, 2018). By implication, teachers should focus on improving students' academic skills, in this sense oral skills by introducing more oral practice in class so that students get used to speaking in English in public and, in this way, learners can develop stronger EFL (speaking) self-concepts.

5.2 Limitations and future research

Despite its complexity, the study has some limitations that need to be acknowledged. Firstly, the timespan between the first and second group interviews is rather short (15 weeks) as compared with other longitudinal studies (e.g., MERCER, 2011b; SHAPKA; KEATING, 2005). Despite its shortness, some changes have been spotted in the system of the self, which reinforces the finding that dynamism might occur in different timescales (from minutes to years) depending on the construct analyzed (MERCER, 2015). Another limitation that most longitudinal studies face is that there has not been a follow-up to explore the durability of any changes, although they might endure if the right conditions, or "affordances" (VAN LIER, 2004), are met in order that students keep growing and evolving, such as a communicative teaching language method,

teacher support or a good classroom atmosphere⁴. Although various data collection methods have been employed, the overall research project did not focus exclusively on this student and so more detailed data could have been collected from further interviews. Similarly, it was not possible to have access to Tatiana's oral presentation mark or to her actual performance of the task, and no data on her subsequent reaction to her performance were gathered except from her response to the questionnaire.

In future studies, it would be especially interesting to (1) use repeated individual interviews with learners through a more extended period, stimulated-recall interviews in order to support their reflection on their actual performance, as well as follow-up interviews after a longer period of time to see if changes in their (speaking) self-concepts persist or if further changes or regression takes place; to (2) explore why some speaking tasks and/or communicative situations might be conceived by the learners as more threatening than others by analyzing speaking self-concepts involving more learners, contexts, and types of oral tasks; and to (3) combine self-reported data with other types of data such as classroom observation, as the findings from the present study indicate that data triangulation is a promising approach in exploring learners' self-concept and revealing any potential paradox across data types.

6. Conclusion

The aim of the article was to analyze one EFL learner's speaking self-concept and to explore its origins, its dynamism, and underlying reasons for the changes during an ESP course at university. This study is methodologically innovative as it has mixed observable data from the classroom and self-reported data, which has provided the analysis of the learner's self-concept with more soundness. Findings show that EFL speaking self-concept was affected by the learner's beliefs systems, that is, negative self-efficacy beliefs at a task level (oral presentation), negative emotions towards the task, her characteristics as a learner, critical negative experiences presenting and perceived experiences of failure. Results also indicate that critical positive experiences presenting and a subjective interpretation of the experience as a success has played an important role in changing self-efficacy beliefs and the affective reactions towards the task (from extremely negative to very positive).

The study also highlights the overlap between self-concept and self-efficacy (BONG; SKAALVIK, 2003; MARSH et al., 2019), showing that self-efficacy beliefs might be peripheral and, thus, easier and faster to change than other core beliefs and related emotions which seem more resistant to change (HARTER, 2006), resulting in a dynamic stability (MERCER, 2011a; 2011b; 2011c). Ultimately, this research also underlines the importance of the affective dimension in EFL speaking self-concept and self-efficacy; on that note, beliefs of incapability appear to be strongly related to the emotional experiences of the participant, particularly to negative emotions such as foreign language anxiety (HORWITZ et al., 1986). This anxiety can further be perceived in the learner's incapability of portraying her present or her possible future self (DÖRNYEI, 2009) as successful in the oral presentation task. Thus, this finding provides a deeper understanding of anxiety in the speaking domain from a qualitative approach and from the subjective viewpoint of the learner, which is particularly relevant for the current flourishing 'emotional turn' in SLA.

⁴ These suggestions derive from the findings obtained in the bigger research project which this study is part of.

In terms of pedagogical implications, it is argued that educators should bear in mind the existence and dynamics of learner's speaking self-concepts and the significance of strengthening them by working on specific oral tasks. Therefore, teachers should help students develop a feeling of success in the task and, by extension, a feeling of progress in their language learning. Furthermore, educators should promote a healthy and positive classroom climate in which students are respectful and do not feel judged by their peers (LYONS, 2014). Ultimately, at least in the Catalan context, more time should be invested in oral practice so that students habituate to speaking in English and they subsequently develop stronger EFL speaking self-concepts.

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