

The Need for Self-Esteem in Teacher and Child

by Laura Blefgen-Togashi

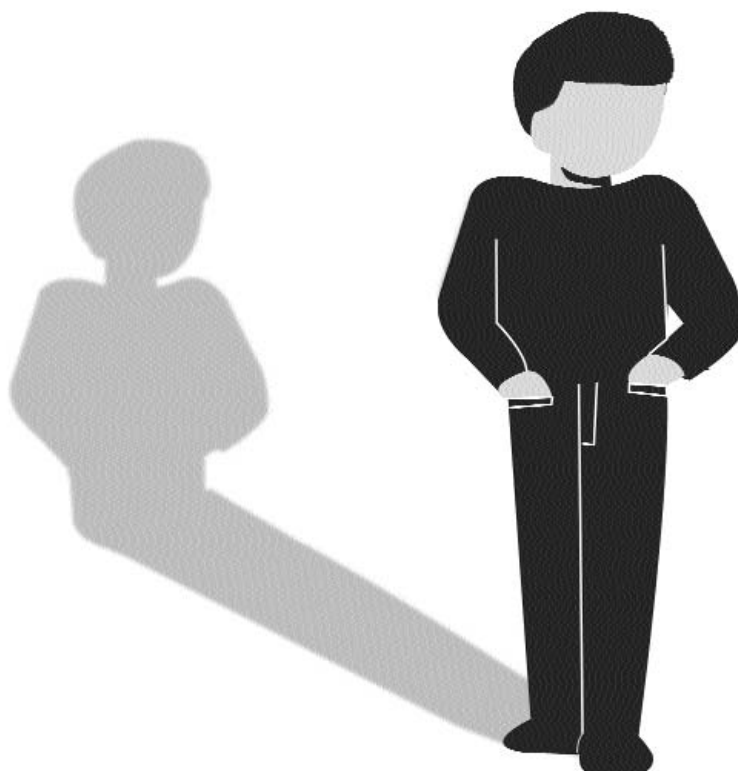
Whether teaching in a public elementary school or at a private language school, one of my goals as a teacher of English to children in Japan is to develop competency in all four skills by providing the students with a well-balanced and structured program that facilitates and encourages language learning. Language is a function of all four skills — listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The four are interconnected, so we as teachers must concentrate on teaching all four, taking into consideration the fact that we have multi-levels and various types of learners (e.g. visual/audial) in a classroom.

Teaching English (or any subject for that matter) should include fun, but learning must be happening. The key here is learning — it is our job as teachers to provide children with an environment that is conducive to learning. That means providing each and every child with a sense of security and comfort that allows real learning to occur. This can only happen in a classroom where a teacher displays good classroom management skills and has a solid program with

clear, concise goals.

In addition to teaching English, another goal that is equally, if not more important, is to foster positive self-esteem and help to develop the “whole child”. It is our duty to help each individual reach his/her fullest potential. For many years, teachers have known that there is a significant and positive relationship between a student’s self-esteem and how well he/she does in school. Teachers generally believe that those individuals who feel good about themselves and their abilities are more likely to succeed in school, whereas those who view themselves and their abilities in a negative way often encounter failure. Therefore, the way students view themselves significantly influences their success in school.

From this statement a number of questions arise. How do we as teachers help to develop a child’s feeling of self-esteem? What influences the development of self-esteem and how, in turn, does self-esteem influence a child’s motivation to learn? More simply, how can we teach English



and at the same time help to build a sense of self-worth in each and every one of our students? This suggests that for the ESL/EFL teacher at elementary level a knowledge of the language and different methodologies is not enough. It is important for an elementary school teacher to possess theoretical knowledge about how children learn and their developmental stages — physical, social, emotional and cognitive.

Children have an underdeveloped sense of the “self” and are very vulnerable to feedback and messages. Because children have immature defense systems, they don’t know how to handle negative feedback. Take for example, a second-grader and an eleventh-grader and how they react to failure. A second-grader gets upset and takes it to heart, while an eleventh-grader often blames the teacher. When a child experiences failure, he/she begins to set lower goals for him/herself. Once a child has formed a negative self-image, this becomes deeply rooted and the task of the teacher becomes very difficult. Teachers then must be very careful about the messages they send to children. We want to develop a positive self-image in a child because self-esteem is vital to learning and development.

A teacher’s effectiveness in developing self-esteem in the classroom depends a great deal on his/her own attitudes, beliefs, and understanding. The key to building positive self-esteem in students is largely connected to what teachers believe about themselves as well as what they believe about their students and, in the case of EFL teachers, the country in which they are teaching. Teachers cannot evaluate or begin to build positive self-esteem in their students until they have built and understood their own. It seems to follow then that teachers must see themselves in an essentially positive and realistic way before they can reach out to like, accept, and respect others.

A teacher’s attitudes towards and opinions about the host country as well as his/her students have a strong influence on the students and their performance during the lesson. What the teacher does in the classroom, the way he/she acts and the lessons he/she provides are all perceived by the students and have a strong impact on them. Therefore, “two very important aspects of the teacher’s role are (1) the attitudes he conveys; and (2) the atmosphere he develops.”

(Purkey, 1970: 49).

For many children it may be their first time learning English — for some this can be a very intimidating experience (especially if it’s their first time interacting with a native English speaker). Naturally, a child may be shy or reluctant to speak out and this is when the teacher plays a crucial role. The attitudes we present to children through our facial expressions, how and when we speak, our posture, and gestures all have a significant influence on children and how they perceive us and themselves.

To create a classroom setting that allows for the development of positive self-esteem there are several factors a teacher must consider. In his book *Self Concept and School Achievement* (1970), William Purkey suggests six factors “(1) challenge; (2) freedom; (3) respect; (4) warmth; (5) control; and (6) success” (1970: 50).

To build up skills in children and in turn their self-esteem, a lesson must consist of both challenge and success — the two are linked. Teachers must be aware of the needs of various levels of language learners in the classroom, know each child’s strengths and capabilities and prepare lessons and activities accordingly (I always prepare two activities based on the same lesson that can be adapted quickly and easily to meet the needs of all students.). We want all children to feel that they have obtained some level of success, therefore it is impor-

tant that the teacher assesses his/her students accurately and has realistic expectations. The lesson must be challenging but not to the point that it is too difficult, for the students will only become frustrated and this in turn may lead to their becoming discouraged. At the same time, if the lesson is too easy, the students may become bored and tune out. As a teacher of English, I want all students to feel that they have mastered something by the end of the lesson and feel good about what they have accomplished. Providing positive experiences in English will contribute to building positive self-esteem; children will feel good about themselves and their abilities and in turn the children will look forward to the next lesson.

Related to this idea is freedom of choice. The students must be given the opportunity to make decisions on their own, for this allows them to develop a sense of faith and trust in their own judgements. This decision-making may

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include things like letting the children decide where they want to sit or where they want to hang their finished work. However, decision-making and choice can also play an integral part in activities in the lesson. For example, after having taught a unit on colors, let each child choose a piece of colored paper by saying "I want blue/yellow/etc., please". In this simple interaction, the child is being allowed to make a decision while at the same time being given the opportunity to use newly acquired language. Taking this a step further, open-ended activities can be introduced to encourage creativity and divergent thinking. For example, letting the children design their own robots and describe their functions using "can/can't" and "has/doesn't have" offers children the opportunity to explore numerous possibilities and build faith in their own judgements in a non-threatening environment. In order to make these decisions, the students must feel free from threat, in other words free from criticism. If we criticize and constantly correct or say "That's wrong", then the child will clam up and may end up not saying or doing anything from that point on. It is only in the type of environment where children feel free to try, that is to try out and use new phrases or expressions, that growth in self-esteem will occur.

In helping students to build good opinions of themselves, teachers must be able to convey to them that each individual is a worthwhile, important, and valuable human being. We do this by treating each student with trust, regard and respect. Teachers must know how to "stroke" their students effectively and positively; "It takes positive strokes to develop an emotionally healthy person with a sense of OKness." (James and Jongeward, 1978: 49). This feeling of "I'm okay, you're okay", or positive self-image is precisely the feeling a teacher must try to encourage or develop in his/her students. We want to give the child the feeling that he/she is okay, that he/she is special.

One way we can do this is by greeting the children with a friendly "hello", complimenting (for example, "I like your new shoes"), and by learning and remembering all the students' names (in a large class ask for a seating plan). Calling on a student by name — pronounced correctly — demonstrates respect and genuine caring, which helps to foster positive self-worth in children. Being recognised adds to a child's sense of dignity and is vital to the development of the total child.

In addition, if the teacher can connect the material being covered in class to the students' personal backgrounds and surroundings then the students are more likely to be motivated and to put more effort into their work. When I introduced "like/don't like" to twelve-year-olds at a public elementary school, I picked words that reflected their world and the environment here in Japan, e.g., cherry blossoms, roller coasters, and cockroaches. The children were very interested in the lesson because it connected to their world. If we are to help cultivate Japanese children with English ability then this is one way — by drawing on their lives and their environment and incorporating this into our English

lessons. This will help deepen their awareness and understanding of their own culture and customs, and in turn will help them to become more accepting and appreciative of other customs and their peoples.

A teacher may create a sense of warmth in the classroom by being calm, accepting, encouraging and supportive, while at the same time maintaining classroom control. Positive reinforcement works well in the elementary grades. Try focusing on the desired action using a positive example: "I really like the way Kohei is sitting". The students will catch the student's name, look to see what he/she is doing and are likely to respond appropriately. If you must reprimand a student, be firm, fair, and consistent. Be sure to focus on the behavior, because we want to show disapproval of the behavior, not the child.

At the end of each lesson, I always try to praise the class for having worked so hard. I never blame or single out an individual for misbehavior or mistakes made during the course of the lesson. We should never embarrass or humiliate a child, for this only fosters negative self-esteem, and disrespect for him/herself and others. Instead, the teacher must create a setting in which each student feels that he/she belongs in the classroom and that the teacher really cares about each and every one of them.

A child's self-esteem then is an extremely important factor in the language learning situation. Therefore, we as teachers must pay very close attention to our teaching methods and modify them if necessary to promote positive self-esteem in our students, as this will affect them for the rest of their lives.

References

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I have found Marianne Celcia-Murcia's book, *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (2001, (Third ed.). Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle and Heinle.) extremely helpful in my teaching career.

A special thanks to all my professors for helping to prepare me for the job I do every day and to all the children who make teaching a very rewarding profession.

Laura graduated from York University's Concurrent Education program in Toronto, Canada with degrees in Education (K-9) and Psychology. She specialized in ESL and Special Education and taught for both the North York and Toronto Boards of Education. She has been teaching in Japan since 1988, and is the owner/head teacher of Canadian Conversation Club — a private English school in Kunitachi City, Tokyo. She conducts workshops for teachers and is involved in material development for elementary school children — "Bamboo Shoots". She has taught English in the local elementary school on a volunteer basis. Her motto is "A teacher has a special way of making learning fun, finding joy in every day, and the best in everyone."