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## ON THE ROLE OF SELF-ESTEEM IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND TEACHING – DESCRIPTION OF AN ART THERAPY WORKSHOP

### O ROLI SAMOOCENY W EDUKACJI JĘZYKOWEJ – OPIS WARSZTATU ARTETERAPEUTYCZNEGO

**Summary.** The article describes the implementation of an art therapy project which main goal was to strengthen the global self-esteem of participants—professionals taking part in the Summer School of Art Therapy—an event organized periodically by the Polish Art Therapists Association “Kajros.” The event is intended to provide a supportive environment for art therapists, fostering positive relationships with their peers and equipping them with tools to enhance their self-esteem regarding their English language proficiency. Consequently, implementing measures to enhance self-esteem proves to be of significant importance. Prior to the presentation of the issues mentioned above, an explanation of key concepts was provided, including self-esteem and its relationship to the level of proficiency in foreign language skills. In addition, the objectives of the workshop were outlined, the group of participants was described, as well as the working methods and visual media used. Subsequently, the course of the workshop was described in detail, followed by concluding remarks.

**Keywords:** art therapy, self-esteem improvement, second language (L2) self-esteem, art therapy workshops

**Streszczenie.** W treści artykułu dokonano opisu realizacji projektu arteterapeutycznego, którego głównym celem było wzmocnienie globalnej samooceny uczestników – profesjonalistów biorących udział w Letniej Szkole Arteterapii – wydarzeniu organizowanym cyklicznie przez Stowarzyszenie Arteterapeutów Polskich „Kajros”. Wydarzenie to ma charakter naukowo-szkoleniowy i koncentruje się na zapewnieniu wsparcia arteterapeutom w relacjach z innymi uczestnikami warsztatów oraz proponowaniu narzędzi, które pomogą im radzić sobie z niską samooceną znajomości języka obcego (angielskiego). Tak więc istotne są działania sprzyjające podniesieniu poziomu tej samooceny. Prezentację wskazanych kwestii poprzedzono wyjaśnieniem kluczowych pojęć, jak samoocena (z uwzględnieniem jej sfer) i samoocena w zakresie opanowania języków obcych. Nakreślono także cele warsztatu, opisano grupę osób w nim uczestniczących, jak też metody pracy i wykorzystane media plastyczne. Następnie dokładnie opisano przebieg warsztatu, a domykając opracowanie przedstawiono refleksje końcowe.

**Słowa kluczowe:** arteterapia, budowanie poczucia własnej wartości, samoocena związana z językiem obcym (L2), warsztaty arteterapeutyczne

## Introduction

Self-esteem is a crucial element of one's personality. Not only does it help an individual cope with difficulties, but also supports mental health, and promotes the development of appropriate social relationships. Moreover, self-esteem may influence one's feelings of stress and anxiety, facilitate their reduction, and enhance motivation (Wojciszke 2011). Therefore, it is of immense importance to build and strengthen one's self-esteem and maintain an adequate level of it, especially in the context of foreign/second language learning. Said process frequently entails stressful situations, such as public speaking or the evaluation of acquired skills through formative assessments, including tests and quizzes. An adequate level of self-esteem is conducive to more effective and efficient learning of new content, which in turn results in higher FL proficiency (Özdemir, Seçkin 2025).

Given the importance of foreign language education, particularly in the context of schoolchildren and young adults, who are required to use and know at least one foreign language, most commonly English (the current *lingua franca*) it is necessary to consider the implications of this personal factor. A range of various workshop activities, including art therapy, might contribute to the development of adequate self-esteem. The utilisation of art therapy facilitates more effective communication, as it allows individuals to express even the deepest fears and unmet needs in a manner that would otherwise remain unarticulated. Communicating one's issues through artistic creation, having a detailed discussion and analysis of the artwork, not only provides a suitable opportunity to understand the essence and roots of one's self-esteem (also in the sphere of FL/L2 learning), but also to put individual language skills into practice.

The present article will thus seek to demonstrate the merits of art therapy and art-therapeutic workshops for the formation of adequate L2 self-esteem as well as global self-esteem of the workshop participants. The workshop in question is a modified version of an existing workshop series dedicated to the improvement of self-esteem in young adults and adolescents. Depending on the competencies and requirements of the prospective participants, the workshop can be conducted in either English or Polish. Furthermore, all tasks can be used to understand the essence of self-esteem, as well as to improve its global level, or simply in the L2 sphere. Furthermore, the tasks and exercises selected may be employed and adapted for the specific purpose of developing FL skills. The objective of the workshop is twofold: firstly, to provide a tool for further work on self-esteem; and secondly, to develop participants' language skills and raise their level of L2 self-esteem.

## Art Therapy

According to The American Art Therapy Association the core of art therapy and art therapeutic activities lies in combining the elements of psychotherapy and social services with the art-creating process (The American Art Therapy Association 29.07.2025). It is thus, the purpose of art therapy to improve and enhance self-esteem, self-awareness, any cognitive- and motor- functions, as well as reduce stress or resolve conflicts, and improve one's resilience or even social skills. Therapy through art integrates various methods, engages body and mind in a non-conventional way to allow its participants/patients/clients to express their emotions and feeling through art, which allows them to avoid certain limitations of the typical therapy based on verbal communication (The American Art Therapy Association 2017). Similarly, The British association of art therapies describes art therapy as a specific type of therapy which is based in art as a main source of the participant's expression and communication. It is worth mentioning that according to the definition presented, art therapy is not a diagnostic tool, but rather a medium by which one might express themselves and present challenging issues, which might be difficult if not impossible otherwise.

Both Moon (1998) and Franklin (1992) emphasised the vital role of art therapy and artistic creations in fostering stable and high self-esteem. Creating art can help individuals to regain a sense of control and agency, among other things. Furthermore, participants in such classes or workshops can undergo a transformation, shifting their perspective from that of a victim to that of a hero or an impartial observer of events. The profound value of art therapy was also recognised by Janie Rhyne (1973), a proponent of Gestalt therapy. Rhyne's theory assumed that it is only through encounters with other people that one can get to know and experience oneself. Through the relationship and dialogue with the therapist, the client/patient/participant can understand their feelings, thoughts, and emotions. Furthermore, she posited that Gestalt therapy is most effective when incorporating art therapy exercises. From her perspective, art functioned as a conduit between two distinct realms: the internal and the external. The experience of her Gestalt art practice provided a framework for the use of art materials in the exploration of one's unique qualities. The process of creation with an artistic medium was also conducive to the broadening of one's perceptual range.

## Self-esteem

According to Leary and MacDonald (2003), self-esteem is one of the most important and prevalent constructs in the entire psychology history. The researchers claim it

remains one of the most broadly studied issue within the realm of social and personality psychology, along with, for example, negative affect (c.f. Bushman et al. 2011, Kernis 2003).

One of the first definitions of self-esteem has been presented by James (1892/2002), who described it as a resultant of what an individual has achieved, and what they potentially were able to achieve. Hence, the level of self-esteem is defined, according to this notion, as a proportion of achievements of the individual to their aspirations. Depending on how the individual's success compares to their expectations, they develop feelings about themselves (self-feelings). The smaller the disproportion between what one has achieved, and what one strived for, the higher the level of one's self-esteem (James 2002).

Kulas (1986) defines self-esteem precisely and broadly as a set of diverse judgements and opinions that an individual applies to themselves. These judgements and opinions may concern both the individual's current characteristics and their potential capabilities (Kulas 1986). Moreover, in some newer views, self-esteem has been conceptualised as the function of the difference between the Ideal Self and the Real Self. In such a model, the level of self-esteem depends on the extent of the discrepancy between these two aspects of the Self.

It is worth noting that self-esteem is typically divided into global and specific. Global self-esteem can be understood as a general attitude towards one's assessments of oneself in various areas of life. It is formed based on specific self-esteems, by averaging them. On the other hand, specific self-esteem, as claimed by Brown and Marshall (2001), is related to one's assessment in specific activities and spheres of functioning. Meanwhile, individuals with the same level of global self-esteem may assess their characteristics and abilities in different ways. Achieving success in school and other areas of life, as well as receiving praise and recognition from parents, teachers and peers, helps to develop positive and high self-esteem. On the other hand, a lack of achievements, frequent failures at school or difficulties in completing tasks set by adults can lead to low self-esteem in children. This situation can result in a feeling of not meeting social expectations and limit the full use of one's own development potential (Jędrzejewska 2016). It is thus possible, for an individual to present different, varied levels of self-esteem in different spheres i.e. one might have high self-esteem in the physical sphere, yet low in the social sphere. Interestingly, correlations between global self-esteem and specific self-esteem are often low (Łukaszewski 1974).

## L2 Self-esteem

While global self-esteem refers to the overall assessment of oneself as a person, L2 self-esteem is a specific dimension related to the perception of one's abilities and values in the context of foreign or second language learning. Moreover, Reasoner (1982) created a model identifying five components of L2 self-esteem, namely:

- 1) security – feeling of safety (emotional and physical),
- 2) identity – the knowledge an individual has about who they are,
- 3) belonging – the feeling of being accepted by the group,
- 4) purpose – possessing the knowledge of what one wants to achieve,
- 5) competence – being confident in one's capability to do something.

In fact, multiple international studies demonstrate that higher foreign language proficiency typically correlates with increased self-esteem, although the strength and direction of this relationship varies across different educational settings.

According to Szyszka (2022), L2 self-esteem may be viewed as both negative or positive emotional response, experienced by individuals while evaluating and considering their linguistic competence. Investigating self-esteem is a continuing concern within the field of foreign language learning and teaching. The issue has already received attention, nevertheless, the research results remain varied and oftentimes ambiguous. The absence of definitive findings underscores the necessity for the continued development of research instruments and the execution of further studies in this domain. For example, the aforementioned Szyszka (2022), conducted research which investigated the relationship between L2 self-esteem and accentedness, which influences the way in which listeners evaluate a person speaking in a foreign/second language (i.e. whether their accent is similar to that of a native speaker). Such assessments, although typically remain subconscious, may still greatly affect the speaker and thus influence how they perceive themselves and their foreign language skills. The author notes that there is a correlation between a strong accent and lower L2 self-esteem. In other words, the more the accent resembles that of native speakers, the higher the L2 self-esteem of the learner/speaker (Szyszka 2022).

Mandokhail et al. (2018), on the other hand, demonstrated that there is a positive correlation between FL speaking proficiency and self-esteem of the learners. In other words, the better an individual's foreign language speaking skills, the higher their self-esteem. What is more, Alrabai (2017) conducted a study on the concept of language self-esteem among 263 Saudi learners of English as a foreign language (EFL), exploring its correlation with their linguistic achievements. The findings of the study demonstrated a strong positive correlation between learners' self-esteem and their EFL learning achievement. Furthermore, the participating learners exhibited low levels of

self-esteem and language achievement. Thus, existing research recognises the critical role played by self-esteem in second and foreign language learning.

### Workshop overview

The inspiration for the workshop, as well as its previous version (which did not address the issue of L2 self-esteem) described in detail in an unpublished bachelor's thesis of the author of this text, was a poem by Krzysztof Kamil Baczyński entitled „Two Loves” – pol. *Dwie miłości*. The selected excerpt from the poem is presented below in the original language (Polish):

„Więc pokochałeś kruche, ciepłe ciało,  
które się w formach słowiczych ustało,  
jak mleko płynie w szklanym smukłym dzbanie,  
skrzypiec ma smutek i roślin śpiewanie.  
Więc pokochałeś je. Jak ruczaj sobie  
przed oczy stawiasz, aby twarze obie:  
i ta odbita, i twoja prawdziwa,  
były jak jeden ruch, co poukrywa  
ziemię jak pożar i niebo jak jaśmin,  
na które jedno serce jest małe i ciasne”.

The two faces presented by the author of the poem – became the inspiration for the title of the entire workshop: „The face true, and face reflected” – pol. *Twarz odbita i twarz prawdziwa*.

The workshop is comprised of four primary components, each comprising two or three exercises. The whole is preceded by a theoretical introduction. Part of the time allocated for the completion of the tasks is devoted to the participants' statements and discussion. Following the conclusion of the summary activity, participants and the audience were invited to share their reflections and queries.

### Workshop Objectives

The goal of present workshop was raising the level of global self-esteem, as well as L2 self-esteem of its participants. In addition, the workshop aimed to offer them tools such as creative activities within the field of visual arts, which could serve as support in situations that may pose a threat to their potentially unstable or inadequately low self-esteem. It is worth pointing out the possibilities of using art therapy through visual arts as a method of shaping and supporting the development of adequate, stable self-esteem, both globally and in each of the distinguished spheres: physical-motor, emotional, social, moral, and intellectual.

In the creation and subsequent adaptation of the workshop to meet the specific requirements of the organiser, particular art forms of significant importance in the therapy of individuals experiencing low self-esteem (including L2 self-esteem) were taken into consideration. The selection of media and artistic forms was informed by the extant literature on the subject.

### **Time and location**

Due to considerable time constraints, the workshop was scheduled to last 90-100 minutes. All its elements and activities were conducted as planned in a room specially designated for this purpose, belonging to the Ignatianum University in Krakow.

### **Participants**

In its original version, the workshop was designed for a specific group of participants: future, new and experienced EFL teachers, who work with all age groups. It was principally concerned with exercises in selected skills, such as writing and speaking in the target language, as well as inspiring creative and critical thinking, teaching empathy, and effective communication of feelings and needs in a foreign language – English.

Ultimately, the workshop was prepared for ten participants. The volunteers who decided to partake in the workshop activities during the meeting were between 23 and 60 years old, and all of them spoke English at least at an intermediate level. The number of participants actively taking part in the workshop was determined, among other things, by the ease of managing the group's activities, time constraints, and the budget allocated for the purchase of the necessary art supplies.

### **Methodology and media used**

The workshop was based on a variety of carefully selected techniques, the majority of which fell within the field of visual arts. It also included physical exercises, as well as elements of bibliotherapy. The selected techniques worked synergistically and created a coherent and comprehensive whole.

Nevertheless, for the specific purpose of the conference the workshop has been modified to suit the needs of possible participants who use English on a lower level of proficiency as well as for all adults who want to participate in art therapy activities related to self-esteem in all its spheres. In the course of the workshop, particular care was taken to ensure that the relationships between the participants and the art therapist conducting the workshop were appropriate and supportive, as one of the objectives of

the workshop was to provide psycho-emotional support that was tailored to the needs and abilities of the participants, as well as conditions for the utilisation of a specific artistic medium to address issues related to low self-esteem.

A variety of materials and art media were used to conduct the planned art therapy workshop activities, such as acrylic paints, ready-made objects (mirrors), coloured paper, felt-tip pens, permanent markers, and glass markers. All necessary equipment was purchased and supplied by the workshop facilitator.

### **Workshop description**

As mentioned previously, the workshop which has been made the subject of this paper, was prepared and conducted as part of the 'Summer School of Art Therapy', a cyclical research and training meeting/conference organised by the Polish Art Therapists Association 'Kajros'. This year's meeting took place in Krakow on 28-29 June 2025 in the lecture halls of Ignatianum University.

It should also be noted that all workshop participants volunteered to participate and were informed in advance that they could opt out of individual exercises and tasks, as well as the entire workshop, if they felt the need to do so. The participants were encouraged to speak freely, were not forced to make any statements, and their comments arose from their internal need to share their thoughts and feelings with the rest of the group (including those not participating actively).

Before the main exercises began, a short lecture was given on the essence of self-esteem, its types, and dimensions, as well as its importance in the context of foreign language learning. In addition, selected tools for measuring general self-esteem, as well as self-assessment in the field of foreign languages, were presented. This introduction allowed participants to gain a more holistic understanding of this multidimensional personal variable.

The first exercise began with a short activity which was aimed at familiarising the participants of the workshop with each other. It involved moving freely around the designated area in the room, observing each other carefully, trying to maintain eye contact, paying close attention to, and analysing movements of everyone in the group. The task ended with a symbolic greeting (either a gesture or a glance). During this exercise, verbal communication was prohibited. The emphasis was on fostering a sense of connection and belonging to the group, as well as cultivating mindfulness towards others. It is worth mentioning that all participants demonstrated great commitment and were very engaged throughout the entire task.

After completing the first preliminary exercise, the participants were asked to form pairs, which they would remain in until the end of the workshop. There were no dif-



difficulties observed connected to finding a partner. Subsequently the participants were asked to take their seats on the futons previously prepared for further activities which required a more stable and comfortable position. Their assigned task was to engage in introspection and consideration of the negative thoughts and messages that accompany them daily. Such words or phrases may have been heard previously during everyday interactions. A selection of words and phrases that were considered to be particularly harsh were then written down on small, colourful cards, each of which was approximately the size of a business card. The cards were prepared by the instructor beforehand.

The second main exercise required pair work and focused on a physical representation of psychological discomfort and weight one carries on a daily basis which is strictly connected to said negative statements. For the purpose of this exercise, each pair was assigned its own workspace. One of the participants was instructed to stand upright against a wall, maintaining a fully vertical posture with their back in full contact with the surface behind them. It was essential that the hands of the person standing upright, remained in a position that would allow for the creation of a space within their palms, wherein the previously inscribed, colourful sheets of paper could be placed. The partners then exchanged their respective sets of cards, with the person who had been placed in the pose receiving the cards that they had previously inscribed. The partner's task was to slowly place the cards containing messages and words into their partner's hands, one by one, giving them time to read them quietly once again. The participants standing against the wall, on the other hand, had to lower her position slightly with each card placed in her hands, bending their knees more and more, so that at the end, after placing the last card in their hands, they remained in a 'chair' position – imitating sitting. This position had to be maintained for as long as the participants were comfortable with. As the maintenance of the position began to cause discomfort and eventually slight pain, it was necessary to immediately cease its performance. This form of exercise, i.e. presenting discomfort and mental pain in a physical, tangible way, was intended to better illustrate how devastating the effects of long-term and systematic repetition and reproduction of negative messages and thoughts about oneself can be. Following the completion of the task, the participants initiated a discussion, initially in pairs and, subsequently, in a group.

The third part of the workshop focused on transforming/changing the participants' perception of themselves. The task illustrated the complexity of an individual. It was meant to present each person as a complete whole, created on the basis of all their experiences, beliefs, passions, and features of character be it positive or negative; all individuals are inevitably flawed and are prone to err, but are also unique and possess many positive traits, which combined create a tightly-knit web of their entire being. Thus, the third task consisted of: 1) writing three selected phrases (from the previous

exercise) on A4-size mirrors provided by the instructor, using permanent or glass markers; 2) painting one's 'true face' on the mirror with the phrases written on it – adding elements related to the interests, passions and good qualities of the participants, using acrylic paints. After each task, the participants had the opportunity to express their opinions about it, share their experiences, and ask each other questions. The facilitator encouraged the participants to refer to their work and describe it in detail, provided that they volunteered to do so and expressed such a desire.

The fourth and final stage of the workshop comprised two exercises. Its preliminary objective was to reiterate the significance of empathy, openness and mindfulness towards others. Initially, the participants were requested to assume a seated position opposite each other, with both individuals looking into the eyes of their partner for a duration of one minute. Furthermore, the participants were required to smile, despite any initial reluctance to do so. In the course of this exercise, participants were permitted to engage in either verbal communication or physical contact with one another, provided that the other person had explicitly consented to such actions.

Approximately half of the group began to laugh yet refrained from commenting verbally. Most participants chose to either embrace or hold each other during or after the exercise. This activity was designed with the objective of enhancing participants' awareness of their mutual presence and fostering a sense of benevolence towards one another. Subsequently, the group proceeded to engage in a process referred to as 'take-away affirmations'. In this exercise, each participant was tasked with the composition of a supportive statement on a small piece of paper, intended to be delivered to another individual. Due to their compact size, the pieces of paper could be easily placed within a wallet or handbag, thus serving as a tangible reminder of the potential to incorporate this positive intention into one's daily routine. Despite its simplicity in form, the exercise had a substantial emotional and relational dimension, fostering trust and mutual appreciation in an atmosphere of safety.

Following the conclusion of the workshop, the participants, and observers, amounting to approximately fifty individuals, were provided with the opportunity to engage in an exchange of experiences, a discussion of selected issues, and to pose questions to the author of the workshop. The overall reception of the workshop was positive. The participants emphasised great usefulness of individual exercises, also in the context of foreign language classes. They found the exercise involving painting a mirror to be the most interesting, while they indicated the task of 'takeaway affirmations' as the most useful in their future professional practice. Attention was drawn to the significant role of positive reinforcement and shaping the habit of mindfulness towards the emotions and needs of others in pupils and children, which is particularly important when working with pupils with diverse educational needs.

Overall, the workshop not only provided participants with specific therapeutic tools but also inspired them to reflect on their own educational and communication attitudes. The need to continue such initiatives, which support the development of soft skills in teaching and strengthen an empathetic approach to education, was also highlighted.

## Conclusions

The workshop was very well received by the participants. What is more, it fulfilled its main function – the effective achievement of the intended objectives. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that a project consisting of a single workshop should not be considered a long-term activity with long-term effects, and as such should be modified and transformed into regular meetings. It is therefore worth considering the possibility of shorter but more frequent art therapy sessions – such a modification of their frequency and length will not only allow for more reliable results of any research but will also transform the type of sessions into a long-term activity with more lasting effects. There are many external factors that can significantly affect the implementation of project activities, however, none of them (e.g. noise from the environment) were found to have a significant impact on the project participant or its course.

An unquestionable advantage of art therapy workshops is that participants have full control over their narrative and can use their art to express whatever they want to share with the therapist at a given moment. Communicating non-verbally, through artistic creation, is functional, and often more practical and effective than attempting to express feelings, which are often very ambivalent, in words. Therefore, the relationship between the participant(s) and the therapist plays a vital role in the therapy process. Furthermore, when the therapist acknowledges and rewards the participants' efforts and work (including its results), it fosters a sense of respect for the individuals and contributes to an enhancement in their self-esteem. It is evident that art therapy through visual arts provides a thorough analysis of the problems experienced by a given person, and changes in the perception of oneself and others during its duration find their particular expression in the person's creations (Riley 1999). Such forms of self-expression help participants develop an adequate sense of self-worth, give them a feeling of having adequate skills and readiness to take on life's challenges and deal with them effectively (Berk 1996). It is worth reiterating that high, adequate self-esteem is associated with a sense of happiness (Branden 1994), while low self-esteem can increase the likelihood of mental disorders such as depression (Harter 2002), which are eliminated or reduced by effective art therapy.

In addition to serving as potential guidelines for future art therapy practice, the abovementioned reflections correlate with the results of recent studies, which have

demonstrated that even less than an hour of creative activity per day can reduce stress and positively influence an individual's mental health, regardless of their artistic experience or talent (Journal of the American Art Therapy Association 2016). However, art therapy is not a universal form of therapy that meets the needs of all participants, which is why, it should be diversified with other forms of activity (Kaimal et al. 2016).

It is imperative to examine the correlation between self-esteem and foreign or second language proficiency in order to inform future developments in language teaching methodologies and learner support strategies. The significance of student self-esteem in the educational process is indisputable. Indeed, it is self-esteem that dictates the challenges a student will undertake, as well as their level of engagement in discussions and their ability to persevere through challenging tasks. It is important to note that a higher level of FL proficiency may, in turn, result in an increase in the student's self-esteem, which is maintained at an adequate level. Therefore, understanding the role of self-esteem in the process of teaching and learning a foreign language is crucial for developing positive teaching strategies that address not only linguistic competence but also learners' psychological well-being, thereby fostering more effective, inclusive, and sustainable language learning environments.

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