

Research Summary

Factors related to willingness to communicate in an L2 classroom

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Overview of the Study

Willingness to communicate (WTC) is an important feature needed in an L2 classroom as it can influence how much a student communicates using the L2. WTC has many influencing factors such as the relationships with the communicator, number of people present, the formality of the situation and the topic of discussion, which could lead to anxiety and consequently lower WTC. No matter how proficient a learner is, if they lack WTC, they will not use their L2. This study focuses on how learners' perceptions and attitudes affect their WTC in the classroom, and how this changes throughout the course of a semester.

Research Methods

The participants in this study were 32 students enrolled in a third-year L2 French course at an Australian University. The data for this study were collected from self-assessment and subject evaluation questionnaires, focus group interviews, and teacher's assessment of the class' participation. The self-assessments were collected at week 4 and week 12, and the focus group interviews and the teacher's assessment in week 12.

Findings

Student perception: speaking skills

Looking at the self-assessments done in week 4 and 12, the students perceived the greatest difficulty in fluency, followed by pronunciation and turn taking. Vocabulary was also another concern with over half of the class perceiving vocabulary as difficult. By week 12, well over half of the class shared that they did not have difficulty with vocabulary. As for the class' perceived weaknesses in their oral proficiency, vocabulary was the most frequent answer given, followed by fluency, anxiety, grammar, pronunciation and use of English. For the strengths, positive attitude/confidence was the most frequent, followed by grammatical knowledge, pronunciation/accent, oral comprehension and vocabulary.

Student perception: class participation

The students rated their own class participation using a scale out of 10, with 10 being the highest in the engagement during class. In week 4, the perceived class participation was a mean of 6.4 out of 10, while in week 12 the average mean went up to 7.1 out of 10.

Attitudes towards class activities

The students' attitudes towards the in-class activities varied within the type of activity. In week 4, 59.4% of the students perceived whole class discussions as the most difficult and in week 12, only 34% of the students perceived it as difficult. Some of the reasons surrounding this perception were due to anxiety and the feeling of being judged and intimidated by other learners. Small group discussions were perceived as easier than whole group discussions, but students had mixed attitudes about them. The reasons were because of the unnatural setting of using an L2 with fellow L2 learners and the awkwardness of small group discussions.

Significance

This study suggests that self-confidence, anxiety, and perception have an effect on learning and the WTC of students. Although the students in this study perceived whole class discussions as difficult, as they improved on their fluency, vocabulary, and self-confidence, they became more willing to communicate in the class. As this, WTC can change with practice and through the development of L2 knowledge and confidence. Thus, these factors that influence WTC is something that instructors could consider in an L2 classroom.

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