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Learners' perceptions and attitudes: Implications for willingness to communicate in an L2 classroom

Diane de Saint Léger [a,1], Neomy Storch [b,*]

[a] French, Italian and Spanish Studies, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia
[b] Linguistics and Applied Linguistics, School of Languages and Linguistics, The University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia

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Abstract

This paper investigates learners' perceptions of their speaking abilities, of their contributions to oral class activities (whole class and small group discussions) as well as their attitudes towards these activities, and how such perceptions and attitudes influenced the learners' willingness to communicate in the L2. The study employed a range of data gathering instruments, but the main source of data came from self-assessment questionnaires. Thirty-two students of French (L2) participated in this semester long study. The self-assessment questionnaires asked students to reflect on their immediate learning environment at various points in the semester and self assess their speaking skills. This study concludes that the students' perception of the speaking activities and of themselves as learners in the foreign language classroom affected their willingness to communicate in a range of ways. In general, as learners' self-confidence increased over time, so did their willingness to use the L2 in class. However, the learners' desire to communicate with peers in small groups was not uniform and was affected by affiliation motives.

Keywords: Self-assessment; Willingness to communicate; Self-confidence; Anxiety; Classroom interaction; Situated learning; Affiliation motives

1. Introduction

The current communicative approaches to second language (L2) instruction emphasize the importance of learners using the L2 in oral and written tasks. These approaches to instruction are based on the premise that learners' competence in the L2 is developed via performance and are supported by the dominant theories of second language acquisition (e.g., Long, 1996; Swain, 2000). This focus on the active use of the L2 in the language classroom has led to the emergence of an important construct in the field of L2 instruction: willingness to communicate (WTC).

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 3 8344 5208.
E-mail addresses: ddsl@unimelb.edu.au (D. de Saint Léger), neomys@unimelb.edu.au (N. Storch).
[1] Tel.: +61 3 8344 6986.

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Willingness to communicate is defined as a learner's "readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2" (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). As Dörnyei (2003) points out, competence in the L2 may not be enough. Learners need to be not only able to communicate but also willing to communicate in the L2. Research has shown that a learner's WTC influences how frequently the learner actively engages in communicating in the L2 (Clément et al., 2003; Yashima et al., 2004). Thus MacIntyre et al. (1998) propose that WTC in L2 should be conceptualised as the primary goal of language instruction and as a comprehensive conceptual framework to describe, explain and predict L2 communication behaviour.

Early models of WTC (e.g., MacIntyre, 1994) depicted WTC as being predicted by two variables: perceived communication competence and communication anxiety. That is, the model predicted that high levels of perceived competence combined with low levels of anxiety would lead to greater WTC and in turn more frequent communication in the L2. In 1998, MacIntyre et al. proposed a multi-layered pyramid model of WTC. The model differentiates between stable enduring influences (such as personality traits) and situation specific influences informing communication behaviour (e.g., desire to communicate with a specific person). Informed by the communication literature on willingness to communicate in the L1, the authors suggest that WTC depends on a range of factors such as the degree of acquaintance between communicators, the number of people present, the formality of the situation, and the topic of discussion.

In a more recent discussion of the model, MacIntyre (2007) emphasizes the complexity of the WTC construct, and the need to clearly define the variables investigated. For example, communication anxiety can operate at the individual level (i.e., an anxious person), or be triggered by the situational contexts (e.g., the language class) or by a particular event. The distinction is important not only in terms of measuring and understanding how these variables affect WTC but also in terms of pedagogical intervention. Anxiety triggered by situational factors is more likely to fluctuate over time and is perhaps more amenable to instructional intervention. Furthermore, MacIntyre calls on researchers to use methodologies which can capture the dynamic nature of this construct.

Studies on WTC, like early studies investigating learners' motivation to study a L2, have tended to rely on data collected at one point of time, often collected via a single instrument, and to consider only quantitative findings. For example, the large scale cross-sectional study by MacIntyre et al. (2002), which investigated the effects of age and gender on WTC, used a questionnaire which asked the participants to rate themselves on eight scales. This questionnaire was administered to the participants only once.

More recent studies have attempted to address this gap in research on WTC by collecting data from a range of sources and over a period of time. For example, the study by Cao and Philp (2006) used a number of data collection tools: student questionnaires (self reports on trait level variables), eight classroom recordings and observations (over one month), and interviews with individual learners conducted at the end of the study to elicit information about situational variables. However, the small scale nature of the study ($n = 8$) precluded the researchers from providing clear correlations between the learner reported individual and situational factors and observed classroom behaviour. The four factors which were most frequently mentioned by the participants as affecting WTC included group size, self-confidence, and familiarity with the interlocutors. These findings supported the findings reported by another small scale study conducted by Kang (2005).

Kang (2005) used a similar range of data collection tools but the number of participants was even smaller ($n = 4$). Kang identified three variables that contributed to the participants' WTC: security, excitement, and a sense of responsibility. Each of these variables was further affected by factors such as topic, interlocutor and conversational context. The notion of security is perhaps similar to that of anxiety and was shaped by relative familiarity among the interlocutors, the size of the group, and the L2 fluency of fellow learners. All the participants reported that they felt less secure and hence less willing to communicate when they perceived other group members to be more fluent than they were. Thus relative L2 proficiency in relation to other learners' perceived proficiency was identified as an important factor in WTC. Other factors affecting feelings of security or confidence included topic familiarity and interest. A greater level of familiarity and interest in the topic lowered feelings of insecurity or raised excitement and hence learners expressed a greater WTC. Although the study led to a proposed preliminary model of situational WTC in L2, the model is static. It is not clear whether learners' perception of these situational variables changed over the course of the semester.

Another interesting finding in Kang's study relates to the learners' attitudes to working in groups with fellow L1 (Korean) speakers. This is particularly pertinent, given the emphasis on small group work advocated