

Boosting learners' self-confidence, enjoyment, and willingness to interact in the language classroom

What this research was about and why it is important

The goal of language learning is to become an able and confident user of the foreign language in real-world communication. Many teachers will recognize, however, that even very able language learners do not automatically engage in communication. Doing so is dependent on the extent to which learners enjoy and are willing to communicate in the foreign language, and the degree of self-confidence they have that such communication will be successful. Knowing how to foster these emotions in class can thus benefit actual language use. In this study, learners received nine speaking lessons. Some learners focused on learning important language elements, while others focused on learning important interaction strategies. The lessons also differed in type of task: some learners practiced speaking in pre-structured role plays, while others partook in information gap tasks). The results showed that self-confidence is best fostered through a combination of interaction strategies instruction and practice in information gap tasks. It also showed that self-confidence predicts interactional performance to some extent.

What the researchers did

- Learners were 147 Dutch learners of English as a foreign language, aged between 14-15. All learners were enrolled in a pre-vocational programme, which prepares them for further vocational education in the Business & Administration sector. Their proficiency in English was elementary to pre-intermediate.
- Learners were randomly placed in one of three teaching programmes, all set in the Business & Administration context, but differing in the type of instruction and the type of practice task. They received 9 speaking lessons.
- Before and after the series of lessons, questionnaires were used to establish the degree of enjoyment, self-confidence, and willingness to communicate. This was used to establish the amount of development learners had made in each area, and to establish whether this development was similar or different for each of the three teaching programmes.
- Learners' ability in oral interaction was tested with two interactive speech tasks. One of these matched the professional Business & Administration context in which learners were trained. The other was set in a personal context of use. Level of vocabulary and prior experience in speaking English were also measured. This information was used to establish whether the three emotional factors influence learners' ability to interact in English.

What the researchers found

- The learners who had been taught interaction strategies and practiced speaking in information gap tasks grew in self-confidence. This was not the case for learners who had focused on learning more language during the lessons, neither when combined with practice in pre-structured role-plays, nor when combined with practice in information gap tasks.
- After 9 lessons, learners enjoyed interacting in English as much as they had done before, but they were a little less willing to engage in interactions than they had been before.
- Learners' enjoyment of and willingness to interact in English did not influence their ability to interact, but their level of self-confidence did influence this. This was only the case in the speech task that had been set in the professional Business & Administration context, in which the learners had also been trained.

Things to consider

- This study suggests that self-confidence positively influences learners' ability to interact in English to some extent, and that self-confidence can be boosted by using information gap tasks, combined with strategies instruction. In light of these findings, EFL teachers may wish to complement existing curricula, in which neither interactional strategies nor information gap tasks commonly occur, to address their learners' needs.
- Not much is known yet about the required time-frame and manner in which WTC develops in adolescent learners. This will need to be studied further.