

ACTION RESEARCH
HOW DO I INCREASE STUDENT MOTIVATION TO SPEAK FRENCH IN AN L2
CLASSROOM/FRENCH IMMERSION SETTING?

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Action research, the process by which individual teachers look introspectively at their own practice has been gaining in popularity in a number of school boards and pre-service programs in Ontario. This improvement of practice can be achieved by examining internal or external factors affecting the classroom environment or by examining the dynamics that affect the community of learning that outline the periphery of the educational system.

As a “new” teacher with only two years of experience, I view action research as a venue for helping me to continue in the role of a lifelong learner. Thus, I hope to improve my classroom practice in order to become a more “effective” teacher. Since conducting an action research project during the 1997/1998 academic year, I have come to feel that it is a necessary component for all educators who are committed to improving not only their general teaching performance but the overall climate of the school community as well.¹

Identifying the problem

As many questions arose when I began this action research project, identifying a distinct problem became a problem onto itself: How do I increase student motivation to speak French in a French Immersion setting? How do I maximize my effectiveness as a second language (L2) teacher? How do I increase the time that students spend speaking and using L2 in the French Immersion classroom?

I realized that by defining one’s focus, a clearer picture would emerge into a tangible goal. “How do I increase student motivation to speak French in an L2 Classroom/French Immersion setting?” seemed to take shape. First of all, many students in the French Immersion setting struggle on a daily basis with their L2, or second language. Many have not chosen to be in the program, but have been arbitrarily placed in French Immersion by their parents to improve their son or daughter’s understanding of French. What transpires in many intermediate French Immersion classrooms is a lack of commitment on the part of the students to actively speak French both with the teacher and with their peers during structured and non-structured time. As educators try to motivate and guide students through the process of self-discovery as L2 learners, their task is often met with resentment and discontent among the intermediate students who feel that they have lost the right to choose. When they do have the right to choose in which language they will communicate, English often prevails.

¹ This was part of a larger pilot pre-service program study “How do I, as a classroom teacher, help to decrease the stress in the lives of my students?” (1997) led by Ron Wideman and Wendy Auger (both assistant professors of Education at Nipissing University).

In undertaking this project, I looked at some of the existing internal factors that could help educators improve practice. I believe that by investigating L2 teaching strategies, teachers will be better equipped to diversify their methods of motivating and teaching L2 students. How can we increase teacher awareness of second language teaching strategies? What teaching strategies are available to second language teachers? How can we maximize their effectiveness within a classroom environment?

The Question Evolves

The goal of this action research is to bridge the gap between instruction in second language education and recent knowledge from cognitive theory and research on teaching and learning strategies. As educators, we must listen and take a proactive approach to teaching strategies embracing the experiences of each student while acknowledging the positive contributions they make to the classroom climate. This will in turn foster the development of new and effective teaching and learning strategies. Once the acquisition is enhanced, student motivation to speak in L2 will increase. With improved strategies for both student and teacher, classroom climate will improve.

It is this investment in teacher training or explicit instruction of teaching and learning strategies that allows teachers to look introspectively at their own teaching practice, thus increasing teacher awareness of second language teaching strategies.

Instructional models for teaching a first language can be applied to second language teaching. This is in part due to the awareness of the educator. By familiarizing themselves with the frameworks of global teaching strategies they are better prepared to adapt these strategies to a second language context. According to H.H. Stern (1992), there has been “long-standing controversies in the history of language pedagogy: the role of L1 in L2 teaching”. He states that for many teachers “the cross lingual strategy is no longer considered a point for discussion; in theory language teaching today is entirely intralingual”. He suggests that it may be wise to reconsider the use of a cross lingual strategy. (p. 279)

Today, many French Immersion programs begin with the introduction of French in the course of the first formal year of instruction in Junior Kindergarten. In J.K., students are presented with L2 in a cross lingual fashion but only for a short time. This is to create a positive classroom climate for the young children. However, within a few short months the transition to a strictly intralingual framework is established and continued throughout the child’s academic life. It is the goal of many L2 French Immersion programs to keep the L2 and L1 apart. This is also evident in the breakdown of L2 and L1 instruction. By grade 3 students are being introduced to formal instruction in their L1. At this time, the first half of the day is spent on L2 instruction and the second half of the day is allocated for L1 instruction. Most often the break in language instruction is marked by the change of instructor. Most French Immersion students have a French teacher and an English Component of French Immersion teacher or E.C.I. This does not permit any practice through translation from and into L2, nor does it allow for comparison between L1 and L2.

However, a transition is taking place in some Ontario schools. Some feel that students should be allowed to have one teacher for the entire day that is qualified in both language streams. This would do much to break down the required segregation of French and English instruction to be replaced by a more balanced language program. That does not mean however that instruction is entirely cross lingual. Rather, during formal instruction in French, some of the cross lingual strategies may be incorporated for increased understanding of L2. The L1 can be used occasionally as a reference system. It can be used occasionally for practice through translation from L1 to L2 and occasionally to compare grammar rules through the Grammar Translation Method. For example, students may be more motivated to speak L2 when they are exposed to the language throughout the day. Increased exposure often means increased proficiency. Often when the day is separated and L1 is “banned” the students passively revolt against the L2 by not using L2 as a means of communication. They will respond to the teacher’s L2 requests using L1. By having a teacher who is instructing in both the L1 and L2, throughout the day, the students have a model. They are able to see that it is possible to have a strong balance of both languages. The L2 is not perceived as a language that is “lower” in status due to the minority of French in the geographic area, thus increasing student motivation to speak the language. The L1 is also not separated from L2. Rather, it is there to enhance L2 acquisition by offering the students a choice.

One of the most interesting attributes of this L1 and L2 Immersion teaching program is that students will surprisingly respond to the instructor using the L2 (for daily routine requests such as asking the teacher for help, requesting permission to use the washroom and for clarification in assigned work e.g. page numbers) even when they are being formally instructed in their L1. This may be because they are freer to experiment using the L2, and not confined to a specific time frame for language use. Some students don’t realize that they have made the leap into French. Some even surprise themselves when it comes to their attention that “Oh, this is math right Madame? I’m supposed to speak English” and my reply is often “Oh, Madame oublie aussi”. This flexibility allows for increased participation not only during L1 classes but seems to also transfer into the L2 classroom. By increasing student autonomy of their language choice, students are increasing their overall participation during L2 formal instructional time.

Teachers in this setting can also integrate curriculum to suit the needs of their students in a cross lingual environment. For example, in the Immersion context, science is an L2 subject taught in French. When presented with the “new” science curriculum prior to the fall 1999, teachers had difficulty accessing French published materials to compliment the new curriculum which meant that in many cases they were able to substitute some L2 activities with some L1 activities that would suit the content requirement and still meet the needs of the L2 learners, and still in keeping with the 50% balance of the two. This occasional substitution solved many of the curriculum needs of the French Immersion teacher, who in the past have had to develop many of their own teaching materials to suit their specific needs. This is not to say that this change in teaching dimension is strictly cross lingual or solely intralingual: rather it is a balance of both dimensions to suit the individual needs of the students.

What teaching strategies will maximize teachers’ effectiveness in relation to the learning styles of his or her students? It is overall teacher awareness that allows instructors to discover instructional materials that enable students to internalize new content during authentic

classroom-based experiences. Instructional models for first language contexts in teaching can be applied to second language teaching. The educator's awareness is key to the implementation of broad strategies that can be transformed to best suit the needs of each individual student. By familiarizing themselves with the framework of global teaching strategies teachers are better prepared to adapt these strategies to a second language context.

Another way to increase student motivation in the L2 classroom is to use technology as a teaching strategy or tool. This action research allowed the discovery of the Internet and World Wide Web as a motivator to increasing language proficiency and intrinsic motivation. The following is a mini-action research study that serves as a continuation to the first part of this paper.

Context of the Research

The World Wide Web has drastically altered our perception of communication and learning in the 21st century. With a click of the mouse, we can now access an unlimited supply of information. We are able to select from a variety of languages and tailor our actions to suit our individual needs. This information technology also provides second-language learners with the unique opportunity to actively participate in a target language. How do you facilitate this technological orbit while increasing language skills? By creating a personal Web page, learners are invited to contribute to the web in their second language as a means of increasing language proficiency. Will this creative contribution also increase metalinguistic awareness? What do second-language learners learn when developing a Web page on-line?

The subject in this case study, Mackenzie, is a lifelong learner and works as an administrator in a bilingual academic institution, requiring basic fluency in L2 to perform daily tasks. She has strong verbal communication skills but has some difficulty with written tasks. She stated that she relies heavily on translators to ensure that all prepared documents are accurate in her L2. While she continues to participate in F.S.L classes, she feels that many of the classroom-based activities don't meet her specific needs as a second language learner.

When asked to participate in this project she was eager to learn how to create a Web page because it would serve as a tool in the workplace and thus as an intrinsic motivator. However, when she realized that this activity was to be conducted in L2 she was apprehensive. After some convincing, she agreed to participate in the mini-action research study.

The entire process took place within a 2-week period. The project consisted of several discussions in the target language to introduce the topic, to brainstorm various themes for the Web page and to implement the steps to the actual Web page design. The final stage was one of reflection, where the subject was asked various metalinguistic type questions in the subject's L1.

Research Objectives

The purpose of this activity was to increase metalinguistic awareness in an L2 learner in order to facilitate increase language proficiency. Does she demonstrate signs of personal struggle? Is she able to articulate difficulties in her L2 and reflect on ways to improve her skills as a second

language learner? Does the activity promote learner autonomy? Does the Constructivist model apply to Web page design?

Theoretical Underpinnings

The Web based activity offers a range of learning opportunities. First of all the learner's "personal" Web page uses authentic language that is of primary interest to the learner and thus the learner is intrinsically motivated to produce quality work. Secondly, the learner is also extrinsically motivated because the teacher is not the sole audience, but the entire World Wide Web. This social interaction gives the student a purpose other than marks or teacher approval. Most importantly, the aim of this activity was to provide an opportunity for the learner to experience an active, social, and creative learning environment in a meaningful context. This allows the learner to take on a participatory role rather than a passive one. The learning is social because it involves constructing meaning in dialogue with others, as opposed to creating the Web page independently. Perkins (1999) suggests that this type of learning enables students to understand that knowledge is socially constructed and that understanding can vary depending of the learner. "Creative learning involves having the learner create or recreate knowledge".

This activity was also linked to Gardner's Multiple Intelligence Theory (1999). The learner is invited to complete an open-ended activity using a variety of "intelligences" such as kinesthetic (actual control over the keyboarding, and mouse), intrapersonal (reflecting on one's own experiences to draw information), interpersonal (sharing the information, looking up new definitions with facilitator and discussing overall "look" of the page), visual (selecting from a wide variety of themes and images), auditory (repeating aloud new terminology and sounding out new words-listening to facilitator) to name a few.

One of the difficulties with creating an on-line Web site in the classroom is the safety issue. As much as we would like to make the activity as authentic as possible there are some important guidelines to keep in mind if the Web pages are put on-line. *Legal Issues & Education Technology: A School Leader's Guide* (1999) offers a sample Web publishing statement and guidelines to follow when publishing students work on the Internet:

It is clear that there are significant risks, as well as significant advantages, involved with allowing students to be identified on the Internet. Therefore, students should not be easily identifiable from materials they might publish on the Internet. No directory information should be posted on the Web for students whose parents have returned the form asking that such information not be released. Preferably, only the student's first name will be used in published student work. Pictures that are a part of student publishing should not include identifying information. If replies to published student work are appropriate, the sponsoring teacher's address should be the e-mail address displayed, not the students'. In special circumstances with parent-signed release, identifying information can be added.

Research Methodology Design

The learner was asked to participate in an L2 based activity over a 2-week period. The learner took the initiative and selected the items that she wanted on the Web. Once the brainstorming was complete, we proceeded with the actual implementation of the Web page design.

The first step was to select a theme for the page. A sunflower theme was selected. Next, the text and the file were inserted. Then an "Email" icon from another web page was selected and saved to the hard drive. Once the icon was saved, it was placed into the site. Third, we scanned the pre-selected photographs. This was difficult because we were unable to send all of the scanned photos to the e-mail address. We didn't realize that photographs took up a lot of memory. Plan B was to ask the Web provider to scan the remaining 3 pictures in a second time and insert them directly into the Web page. The final stage of Web design was a review stage where the L2 learner revised and edited her work prior to putting the page on-line.

One of the difficulties was putting the page on the Internet for one day, for the purpose of this project. At first, I wanted to have some kind of false Web page where it could only be accessed in an Intranet system, like *Webkf* used at the University of Toronto. However, I wanted to make this activity as authentic as possible where the learner would get the satisfaction of seeing her page on the actual Internet. I was able to have her page "hidden" in an already existing site from a local organization.² I wanted to ensure that it was not accessible to the public and I was ensured that the only way that someone could see the site was to type in the actual URL in its entirety. I also asked the service provider if a search engine would pull up this web page if someone typed in "Mackenzie". He stated that it would in no way access our page. Another obstacle that faced us was the placing a personal photo on the Internet. The learner was apprehensive because "what if someone cuts off my head and puts it on another body?" She allowed us to use a photo once she knew that access was limited. After reading the guidelines, we removed Mackenzie's last name to help with anonymity. We did, however, keep "Jennifer Straub" in the page since my name is already published on the site.

Data Collected

Throughout our sessions, data was collected via tape recorder in order to gather vital dialogue for discourse analysis³. Other methods included note taking to ensure that all verbal communication was documented within a contextualized framework. Gestures, facial expressions and mannerisms were the key to deciphering her personal struggles and frustration in her second language. Data was also collected by copying the Web page "Chez-Moi, par Mackenzie" into html format on my desktop for reference.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed qualitatively. Arguing that qualitative analysis expound on the nature of interaction, Warschauer and Kern (2000) state that Computer Mediated Conferences especially

² For confidentiality purposes, I am withholding the name of the site and the organization.

³ I also learned that micro cassette recorder tape will get tangled and break in the play mode when trying to play it back over and over for documenting discourse analysis. A better suggestion would be to use computer-based recorders where there is no tape involved.

provide “an ideal medium for learners to benefit from networked communities...that interaction is an area of primary importance to teachers as learners modify, negotiate, and respond to corrective peer feedback in order to ‘achieve higher levels of metalinguistic awareness’” (p. 240).

During our session, Mackenzie was able to modify each of her contributions. At first she would state her intent in the L2. Then she would proceed to say verbatim what she wanted to type in her L2. Once her sentences were clear for her, she would then proceed to “keypunch” her work and re-read the sentence. Rarely did she ask for assistance in preliminary writing. Throughout the activity, I reminded her that I would assist her only if she requested help. She asked for one synonym for the word “favourite”. When asked if she wanted to add any French accents to her work she stated that it would not help her to know how to change to the French keyboard because she wouldn’t know where to put them. I was surprised when she did not request help in accent placement. I wondered if this was because in English accents are not important, and that her messages would still be understood in French. For example if text is in capital form accents are rarely used. She did however look for acceptance. “C’est bien?” and I would respond with a “yes” head nod. I would also encourage her to continue. “Ah c’est très bien! Continue!!” Within the 2-hour period the learner requested 3 “Time-Outs” where she would signal with her hands to stop the recorder. This allowed her to “rest mentally”. She stated that breaks were needed because of the high level of concentration needed to complete the task. These “Time-Outs” were also positively correlated with increased levels of frustration. When she was having some difficulty finding appropriate vocabulary from her existing schema she preferred to take a break than request assistance.

According to Warschauer & Kern (2000), Computer-mediated communication (CMC) occurs in a written, electronically recorded form, which “gives students additional opportunities to plan their discourse and to notice and reflect on language use in the messages they compose and read” (p. 240). Mackenzie often would revise a previous sentence or two to ensure that the meaning was correct. However, she did not edit every section of her writing. What I found interesting was that once the project was completed she mentioned that she would have liked to have more time to correct her mistakes “maybe a few days later”. Once everything had been placed on the Web, she found some lexical errors.

Reflection questions -Proof of metalinguistic awareness

Question 1: In your opinion what does a second language learner learn when creating a personal Web page?

Response: “Well, you learn your level of ability because by making the Web page you have the visual as well as the technical skills combining together so you realize that,... it proves to me that I am very weak in my language skills because I wasn’t able to type and think and translate all at the same time. Ah.. Sometimes we really think that we’re advancing in a language but when you try and combine the two things were I naturally type in English without even thinking about what’s happening on the keyboard and I don’t worry about how I spell it’s all automatic. When I’m doing a Web page in French I’m probably at the kindergarten level...I mean at a much slower average...what I mean is normal for me. I type 60 words per minute and I can translate

from shorthand to English or shorthand to French quickly but when I had to translate and type on the screen to get the visual immediately my skills were cut in half.

Question 2: Having a teaching background yourself, how do you see Web page design as a benefit in the classroom, or do you not see it as a benefit?

Response: “Oh it would definitely be a benefit because the child can work at her own pace. It took me a long time and struggle through the language and the motor skills together. But Doing a personal Web page is very personal. It’s me and the computer which is much less threatening to me then it would have been had I been sitting in a class and I had to stand up in front of all of my peers and show my weaknesses. This way I was learning and it was risk free”.

Question 3: Did you ever feel frustrated while doing the Web page?

Response: “Totally frustrated while I was doing the Web page because it makes you feel short of a moron or idiot because you’re sitting at your computer in front of the screen trying to create and you’re restricted by your lack of vocabulary.”

Question 4: Do you have any suggestions for teachers who would like to implement Web page creation as part of a French-as-a-Second-Language program?

Response: “Have your students ready with the vocabulary ahead of time. This way they will know the words for scroll, drag, file etc. and they won’t need to look at the sheet all the time. I would also break up the activity in several stages...one to prepare vocabulary, one to talk in class about the pictures and the design and then maybe small groups instead of a big class.”

Mackenzie also expressed that because she had good technical skills she was better prepared to complete the activity. Otherwise, she felt that any lack of “technical skills would have overridden her language skills and taken away from the experience”.

Response to the research question

Does having a student-centered Web page activity in the learners L2 help to increase metalinguistic awareness? In this study, the answer was a resounding “YES!” Throughout the activity, from the planning to the post reflection of the task, Mackenzie continued to question her abilities as a learner. That is not to say that she was discouraged by her awareness of difficulty with the writing task. Rather, it inspired her to change her focus in selecting F.S.L. courses for the future. It enabled her to realize where she was having difficulty.

Professional Growth

This mini-action research project will serve me as a stepping-stone into many future Web-based projects. This fall, I hope to introduce our schools’ first student-centered Web pages and to use these pages as student portfolios. As suggested in *Legal issues and education technology* (1999), I will be helping them “find new ways to enhance the learning environment by relying on technology to open an electronic window to information, images and interactive exchanges around the globe”. Our service provider has also informed me that it is possible to accommodate

individual student Web pages on a restricted access Teacher page, where parents would be given a password to access the site, their child's work, curriculum expectations and the calendar.

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