

BRIDGING LANGUAGE GAPS OF L2 (SECOND LANGUAGE) TEACHERS BY OPTIMIZING THEIR SELF-AWARENESS

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Abstract

During a Canada-wide consultation session of teacher trainers for future teachers of French, Canada's official second language (L2), given the problematic situation of unprepared candidates with questionable mastery of the language, some instructors even retreated to a position stating that these students need to be encouraged although they are struggling with French. What this implies is placing role models in classes with inaccurate French, repeating the same situation if not making it even worse as indeed early French immersion is still the chosen protocol by Canadian non-French speaking parents. Young children absorb language like sponges repeating their teacher and if their French is inaccurate, learning the mistakes.

What is however of more crucial importance is not to replicate language programs delivery from which learners emerge without sufficient mastery to make themselves understood because of inaccurately learnt language forms. Therefore, we have to uncover remedies to properly guide all learners, through strategies and techniques for their individual management of the language they are trying to acquire-learn. We want to ensure an economy of time in teaching programs with efficient contact times.

Revisiting language programme approaches to uncover what was advocated for error correction, we looked at actional attention (Ellis, 1992), work on noticing (Fotos, 1993), markedness (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), interference (Abdullah & Jackson, 1998) interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972), the monitor model (Krashen, 1982) and recent types of approaches, namely notional functional, communicative, and action-oriented. As well, we gleaned insights from a review of the literature on strategies and techniques including Raab, (1982) on spectator hypothesis with feedback to the whole class; through peer correction by Cheveneth, Chun and Luppescu (1983); with other innovative techniques suggested by Edge (1983); techniques advocated by Vigil and Oller (1976) for oral correction; and correction across modalities (Rixon, 1993).

We will report on a qualitative study (Creswell & Poth, 2018) based on an analysis of instructor's notes regarding the observed effect on some of the strategies that were tried and across different student groups. In this study, notes on how the instructor devised ways of drawing attention and using metacognition to obtain the best results are examined. In addition, ways involving the affective domain, through emotions and also using innovative ways through disruptions etc. were tried to see if they provided a further impact.

Students reported that they appreciated the corrective feedback the way it was dispensed. However results show a variety of concerns, namely the problem with deeply fossilized errors, some students' being over confident about their language ability, and either a deep concern for making errors that is paralyzing or a belief that over time correction will take place in interlanguage development without making any effort.

Due to page limitations, in this paper we will essentially present overarching aspects.

Keywords: *Self-awareness raising, error correction, emotions and creativity.*

1. Introduction

A major problem identified in Canadian French language programs in English language (L1) speaking provinces was the fact that many students have inadequate levels of French. The difficulty resides in the fact that student error correction is very controversial and that there are correction protocols both for oral and written French. Findings in psychology point to the need to access awareness in order to operate change and for some repeated applications for consolidation.

The most recent tendency in order to bring about paying more attention to language use and correction has been to fall back on multi-linguaging. Using the mother tongue to clarify aspects in L2 can help improve consciousness raising around problems. The danger with this strategy is going back to talking about the language rather than talking the language to be learned.

2. Method

We used a qualitative approach as we were interested in finding out a lot of detail about lived experiences (Creswell, & Poth, 2018). The site is a Faculty of Education where teacher preparation programs are offered. Participants were students enrolled in French teacher specialization and there were six courses under scrutiny with a total of approximately 150 students with some drop-outs and irregular attendance. These future teachers in Canada are required to have two teaching subjects, a major and a minor with fewer courses in that second subject. The study consisted of the analysis of an instructor's teaching journal and class notes, and it was decided to investigate over two academic years as it appeared that the problems seemed to increase over time and additional strategies had to be applied.

Entrance into the program is highly competitive and students' statements of prior experiences are attributed as much value as academic criteria. The program has two components, with one consecutive stream i.e. students who had just decided to become teachers, and a concurrent stream with students carrying out their regular academic studies along with introductory education courses during all the university years, including class observations and some teaching practice.

The analysis consisted mainly in textual analysis highlighting emergent themes and experiences to uncover how these students language barriers were overcome, what strategies were used, what prompted what reactions etc. A description of the elements behind the instructor's decisions included the fact that a number of complex aspects were involved especially when having to deal with fossilized language forms, anglicized or influenced by Spanish due to South American population movements. The instructor also decided that in order to prevent anxiety and the blockage of the affective filter a subtle combination of strategies was deemed to be more effective in light of the accumulation of complex issues to be faced. Anonymity was maintained and pseudonyms used when names are mentioned.

3. Findings and discussion

The idea was to uncover remedies to properly guide all learners, through strategies and techniques for their individual management of the language they were trying to improve upon. The need to ensure an economy of time in teaching programs with efficient contact times was identified given the collapse of the program into 16 months rather than the two full years mandated by the Ministry.

By the end of the courses, students were thankful for all they had acquired and appreciated the various reflections and designed activities embedded with correction techniques. The success of the strategies could be measured by the superior quality of the students' assignments.

The analysis of instructor's notes allowed to tease out the following major themes: the need for various strategies, the need to alleviate strong emotional upsets, how to ease anxiety, the impacts of preparedness and confidence, and of changes of focus.

3.1. Articulating a wide variety of strategies

The study shows that the instructor decided to present all the diverse views on student correction to the class to familiarize them with a variety of possibilities from which they could choose. They looked at corrections through actional attention (Ellis, 1992), work on noticing (Fotos, 1992, 1993a, 1993b), markedness (Larsen-Freeman, 2018), interference (Abdullah, & Jackson, 1987), interlanguage theory (Selinker, 1972), the monitor model (Krashen, 1982) and recent types of approaches, namely notional functional, communicative, and action-oriented. As well, insights were gleaned from a review of the literature on strategies and techniques including Raab, (1982) on spectator hypothesis with feedback to the whole class; through peer correction by Chenoweth, Day, Chun and Luppescu (1983); with other innovative techniques suggested by Edge (1983); techniques advocated by Vigil and Oller (1976) for oral correction; and correction across modalities (Rixon, & Erwin, 1993).

Following this presentation of concepts the idea was to find correction possibilities across a variety of practical activities. Through their interactions, students were made more aware of language use and interacted to give corrective feedback or asked questions. These activities involved group work.

They carried out dicto-gloss activities. These consist of note taking with the objective of reconstituting a text. Students were to draw three columns to allow note taking after listening to an oral text three times. After each listening, they shared and completed their notes with a peer with the idea that for the completion of the last column there would be more discussion as the text had to be recreated.

They also engaged in concept attainment exercises. These are based on identifying a concept through binary eliminations using identifiers. These were written on small pieces of paper and handed to students to be placed on a 'yes versus no' chart, making hypotheses as to whether or not the qualifier applies. Throughout, students discuss possibilities and end up discovering the concept. This activity was centred around language forms and lexical items.

Disruption in class routine also allowed better concentration. For instance gaming aspects were added to regular activities where ever possible. As an example, for one activity type they could not use certain words, or there was a time limitation, or instead of a written answer they had to produce a graph, using a summarizing strategy. There were 20 question group competitions based on explanation of language use and definitions. Activity centres were devised to increase the pace of activity completion with a rotation every seven to 10 minutes. This entailed a fair amount of negotiations around language forms.

Creativity and originality were encouraged, like for instance having students draw their emblem on language learning situations, or having them draw their week-end activities, exchanging drawings with a partner who was to glean the information from the drawing and by asking questions.

Contact with L1 products were encouraged, for instance through treasure hunts in real museums virtually. In this case, students could choose activities suited to their level of proficiency.

All the examples above showed students engaging with some of the techniques presented, they were consciously active and questions were dealt with at the metacognitive level.

In addition to group work, we also resorted to whole class feedback based on spectator hypothesis. This was achieved through presentations in front of the whole class, and also 'four corner activities'. In the latter case, a controversial topic or an item from the daily news, became the object of discussion and students had to place themselves in the correspondingly labelled corner, according to whether they totally or somewhat agreed or disagreed. Then in turn each had to justify the choice and all this resulted in a final discussion. This required a number of language manipulations and increased students paying attention to the language forms used.

Throughout all the diverse practices students remained aware of their own and their peers' language uses and also engaged in self- and peer-correction as well as asking relevant questions in order to get help.

3.2. Expression of anger, blame and overall fatigue

A small number of consecutive students expressed anger when being confronted to their insufficient mastery of the French language for classroom use after having spent years studying it. This came about during classroom oral activities, especially with the realization that they were lacking many vocabulary items, and were stuck more with formulaic expressions than with a communicative ability.

Five of them blamed their school teachers for not having pointed out the mistakes they were making and letting them get away with speaking what is termed as 'franglais' in Canada, i.e. French based on English.

The activities devised, with encouragement from the instructor, peer support and continuous practice over the five weeks prior their actual teaching placement in schools appeared to somewhat alleviate this anger and feelings of incompetency. The main point was to show them how quickly they could adapt and complete assignments with their peers as all early assignments were mainly based on group work especially during the second year. After having identified the problems over the previous years and their aggravation over time that had been deemed to be a good decision.

Three others were upset because they felt that in the university courses they took there was insufficient practice in the oral language. Therefore, obviously no corrective feedback was available to these students on their oral interactions. This could, also be based on the fact, that there are contradictory discourses on the effectiveness and efficiency of the different types of corrections. Various researchers recommend not interrupting the flow of speech during oral practice, specially recommending to not worry about mistakes, but only be concerned with follow-up on errors that are more serious. On the other hand, other research findings point to the need to nip errors in the bud before they become fossilized, and recommend immediate intervention. Specific ways of intervening are also subject to controversies with the only overall acceptable strategy, according to specialists, is involving metacognition if one expects results.

Hence, confronting the speakers with a question to have them reflect on what they said, at a metacognitive level, requires them to reflect on language use and attempt to sort out what they are trying to say and adjust it to a form that they can acknowledge as being accurate. Or else the instructor can keep on prompting until an accurate way of expressing a thought is found, even if only in the form of a paraphrase.

All in all, carrying out this correction implies difficult choices, is time consuming and delicate and perhaps if some instructors choose not to do this, perhaps they also do not have the required specialized background as an applied linguist in a teacher preparation program would have.

This information was unsettling as a prerequisite for entrance into the program is an advanced course in oral French and this did not make sense and required further investigating.

A number of the students in this group were able to overcome some hurdles due their level of creativity. They used alternative pathways, resorted to more visual data and creative uses of applications for the classroom. This creativity also helped them keep motivated when facing challenges.

3.3. Anxiety and the affective filter

It was therefore of utmost importance to design activities to reduce anxiety and hence to avoid blockage of the affective filter (Krashen, 1982). Hence devising action-oriented communication around a gaming approach, activities for the development of motivation by choosing topics of interest to students or adding an interesting aspect to topics had to be explored.

Multilingualing is a technique used to reduce anxiety by allowing students who share a heritage language to use it to help better understand their work in L2, separately practicing specifically for fluency and accuracy. The most recent trend to bring more attention to language use and more efficient and effective correction is using the mothertongue.

The lack of differentiation between correcting for accuracy and developing fluency also causes confusion. Without this separation, there can only be uncertainty as regards students' progress. In addition, without the distinction, when teachers are trying to conflate the two into just productive or receptive abilities, there are too many aspects that have to be left unexplored. Recently in Ontario with the push on communication, accuracy was often left by the wayside and this could account for some gaps in the present student population in the teacher preparation program.

Despite all the attempts at alignment and fine-tuning when faced with their first school placement assignments, many students became very anxious, Although the majority of them displayed a certain degree of confidence the students from the concurrent program all indicated that they felt apprehensive. A number of them got their placement in French changed to the second term, hoping to develop more confidence over time and to get better acclimated. Nevertheless two students dropped out of the program at that time, one in each year. Mark, although feeling uncertain, had an acceptable level of communicative competence and an excellent accent in French, having a French grandmother, however he felt unable to face students in the classroom. He was given an opportunity to reenter the program in the following year. Paul's fluency in French was not adequate and he withdrew totally from the program despite my help with plans in getting him to use readymade materials thus minimizing his direct involvement in directionality and only in facilitation in front of his classes.

More recent statements from the Ontario College of Teachers, the accreditation body in the province, point to a lack of resilience in new teachers leading to burnout. Moreover, studies identified new teachers lacking self-regulation strategies that have to do with how stressors are handled. They are found to be insufficiently resourceful in ways to manage and regulate their energy states, their emotions, thoughts and behaviors in acceptable ways with positive results in order to be well, have loving relationships and effectively learn. That means that they are lacking self-awareness, emotional intelligence, an efficient way to filter sensory stimulation, to relate to others and to sustain focus in order to cope well with stress. The awareness of their inadequate quality of language is an additional stressor.

3.4. Preparedness and confidence

Of a total of 130 students, the majority were confident and took everything in their stride. Not only did they have good levels of French, there were also French native speakers included, plus based on the criteria in the program selection process these students also had excellent teaching capabilities. Nevertheless a stark contrast could be identified between the French first language (L1) speakers and the overconfident French Immersion (FI) students with less than adequate levels of French.

As another example, one student from a private university, accepted mainly for high grades, displayed a total lack of preparedness in terms of language background, as she was unable to express herself in French without seeming to take time to translate from English. She managed during the initial five weeks thanks to peer support. However, she demonstrated a good level of confidence, showed that she had acquired self-regulation and appeared to be resilient.

Two students had graduated from an on-line university with all their French courses on-line and no opportunity to really interact orally. Although their communicative ability was hesitant initially, not necessarily fraught with mistakes, it appeared that their maturity and a solid basis that they eventually managed to reactivate, placed them in good stead. These two students developed a proper way of channeling their abilities and had the willingness to explore all avenues.

4. Conclusion

By the end of year, many of the strategies had become second nature and besides self-correction and peer correction. Some students also appeared to have sought help with corrections from specialized resource personnel like the University writing center staff with help available for the review of assignments. All in all, this developing awareness and the commitment to produce professional quality of language will place my students in good stead in their career if they continue with the habits that were practiced in consciousness raising for quality language during class.

Better yet, it is hoped and as the strategies were found useful and interesting, that in turn these will also be implemented in their own classrooms as they monitor their own students' progress in using the French language.

Where major problems were identified we have to remember that language plays an essential role in the distortion of meaning (deGramont, 1992), hence the problems might be aggravated due to the use of L2. As well, more complex issues come into play and it would be useful to investigate them in future research, namely the importance of the more specific contexts that shaped these students' experiences (Baars, 1997).

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