

Chapter 84

Motivation and Learning Outcomes in Reciprocal SCMC Language–Learning

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ABSTRACT

In reciprocal learning, learners of different mother tongues are paired so that each can help the other learn their language. Developments in ICT have broadened the possibilities for reciprocal learning, enabling synchronous computer-mediated communication (SCMC). This study focuses on 48 French-speaking learners paired with 48 British students. Each pair worked synchronously and quasi-autonomously on communication activities in a real-time, quasi-face-to-face environment via Skype. This article reports on the pedagogical potential of the above SCMC scheme. The data discussed are drawn from a quantitative study carried out during the scheme. Two instruments were used for data-collection during the investigation: a self-report questionnaire on motivation, and a battery of language tests completed after the SCMC encounters had taken place. The same tests were also taken by a control group (N=48). The findings suggest that SCMC improves oral expression and interactivity in that it helps learners to enhance language confidence and language knowledge gains.

1. INTRODUCTION

Previous research suggests that French university engineering students may be characterized as extrinsically motivated and performance oriented (Brown, 2009). This behaviour may be explained by a prevailing engineering education sub-culture that has been defined as uniquely deductive (Prince & Felder, 2006). Deductive approaches to instruction, and the teacher-centred approaches they imply, do not lead themselves easily to many of the more communicative and learner-centred approaches to language learning preferred in contemporary language-learning instruction. An alternative explanation for this behaviour may be the fact that all university students in France must follow mandatory English language courses or are required to achieve external language certification before graduation. The unwelcome effects, in terms of unconstructive attitudes and low motivation, that mandatory courses may have on students have

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-7663-1.ch084

been well-documented elsewhere (Macfarlane, 2013; Kelly, 2012; Eshel & Kohavi, 2003). Indeed, even though lack of motivation may be understandable in such circumstances, the learning context French learners operate in does not explain their performance orientation. In addition, many students who are studying engineering perceive foreign language learning as an abstraction: just another item on a long list of academic requirements. As a result, their expectations about language courses are frequently very different from those of course lecturers who, on the whole, tend to favour inductive approaches.

In an attempt to nurture greater intrinsic motivation and to break the passivity towards language learning (Brown, 2007) observed among the majority of students in the French engineering school (an elite higher education establishment) where the present investigation took place, a series of credit-based optional language courses has been set up over the last few years. These courses take place outside usual lecturing hours and are strictly oriented towards honing the oral skills (speaking and listening). One of the courses on offer was labelled eTandem, in line with terminology used for other similar modes of telecollabation (for example O'Dowd, 2013; O'Dowd, 2016).

1.1. Motivation

The sources of motivated behaviour are manifold. Among them are self-regulation, self-determination, autonomy, responsibility, locus of control and self-efficacy. Motivation, within its overarching framework Self-Determination Theory (SDT), may be defined as “an inherent orientation towards growth and development, energized and sustained, in part, by the fulfilment of the psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness” (Niemi et al., 2006, p. 762). This “active propensity towards engagement with, and internalization of, social values is considered an important basis of healthy development, marked by the tendencies towards differentiation of personal and social structures and their integration into a coherent, unified, healthy sense of self” (Niemi et al., 2006, p. 762). Within SDT, even though motivated behaviour is ranged along a continuum from absence of regulation (amotivation) to intrinsic regulation (Deci & Ryan, 2000), it is usually broken down into two major components: extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. The former of the two is generally considered the less desirable because it pertains to behaviours initiated either to achieve an external goal or in response to external pressures. The latter, on the other hand, refers to behaviours initiated by an inherent interest on the part of the initiator because an activity is perceived to be interesting or satisfying. In learning, extrinsically motivating factors may include significant others such as parents or teachers (authority figures who can exercise pressure) or peers (an incentive to attend lessons because the people with whom one enjoys socialising will be there), as well as other external factors like the obligation to attend class, grades or extra credits, praise or approval and other rewards. These rewards may provide the satisfaction that the learning task does not provide. The presence of intrinsic motivation in learning implies that an individual will work on a particular task because he or she finds it inherently interesting or enjoyable, or because that individual enjoys the challenge that the learning process involves. In other words, the learning activity is a reward in and of itself.

In language learning, motivation has been identified as one of the key factors that determine L2 learner success. It is said to act as a catalyst to launch initial learning and as a sustaining force to a language-learning process that may wane over time (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007). Several key constructs of language-learning motivation have been proposed, the most recent of which are the “Process Model

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