

Review-and-Relevance Report #2

Conrad Gregory

University of Southern Mississippi, MATL-French

WL 663 H001 Applied Linguistics in Second and Foreign Languages

Dr. Katie Angus

October 4, 2020

In “Self-Assessment of Speaking Skills and Participation in a Foreign Language Class,” Diane de Saint Léger (2009) discusses a problem faced by many second language instructors: how to increase participation in in-class speaking activities. Specifically, she focused on university students in an advanced French class at the University of Melbourne. The main challenges, she notes, are that at this advanced level there is a wide range of student motivations and also very wide difference in students’ prior exposure to the French language. Some students have only spoken French in class whereas others may have participated in study abroad programs or spent extensive time in France or a Francophone country. This results in a dramatic range of speaking abilities and can create various levels of anxiety and even an unwillingness to participate in oral activities among those students that do not have strong speaking skills. Many students feel intimidated, she writes, and withdraw from any type of public display of their speaking abilities. de Saint Léger (2009) therefore sets out to prove (or disprove) her hypothesis: That by introducing Self-Assessment (SA) techniques into the classroom environment, learners would be encouraged and more motivated to participate in speaking activities.

There has been increase use in classrooms and also a growing body of research in SA she writes, but the way it is typically used is to have learners assess the work of their peers as opposed to their own performance. The types of SA employed has been quite varied and range from standardized questionnaires to reflective diaries and open-ended informal activities. In Second Language Acquisition (SLA), de Saint Léger (2009) states that SA has been primarily quantitative and used to assess the validity and reliability of the learners’ SA rather than a means to assess improvement in the subject. SA theory is currently moving away from this perspective and is beginning to focus on learner motivation and ways to enhance to development (de Saint Léger, 2009). She also states that one of the shifts in SA is a move towards integrating an

increasing amount of learning responsibilities onto the students which has shown to have a positive impact on student motivation.

The study de Saint Léger (2009) conducted was on 90 students enrolled in advanced French and had the objective of assessing learner perception of their own abilities over a 12-week course. Students were told that 45% of their grade would be based on speaking and participation and that participating in speaking activities was critical to developing their fluency. Work in the classroom involving speaking included small group discussion. Some of this work was spontaneous and other work was planned before time, ie, presenting on a theme. These groups were assigned randomly. Students were asked to self-assess at the fourth, eighth and twelfth weeks. In addition, at week four they were also asked to set individual goals such as improvement in pronunciation or grammar.

The results of the study did not identify any concrete improvement in speaking ability but there was an improvement in learners' self-ratings and their views of their own abilities. According to questionnaires and focus groups at the end of the class, students found the process of SA very useful and enjoyed being able to set their own learning objectives.

I agree with de Saint Léger's objectives and relate very well to the challenges she faced. In the beginner classes, students are usually at the same level with their speaking abilities but in the advanced classes it is true that there can be a wide range of speaking abilities and finding ways to get equal levels of verbal participation among all student is a constant challenge. The idea of SA is interesting as a technique to tackle this problem and one critical aspect of this process, as she describes, is individual goal-setting, which students conducted in week four. The one issue that the article failed to answer though was did the use of SA actually create higher levels of participation in speaking activities. The study's results point to an increase in learners' views of

their own abilities and therefore one would assume an increase in their self-confidence. But did the use of SA actually result in increased speaking. This seemed to be one of the main problems to solve, but the article doesn't really state whether it was addressed.

From my own experience as a language teacher, I have found that students do well when they have less anxiety and when they are feeling more self-confident. Much of this, I believe, is impacted by the environment the teacher creates. Is it an environment where students are encouraged and supported, for example? Many elements of my personal approach to this have been drawn from experience as a women's high school soccer coach where I saw that student development and self-confidence came from my efforts to establish personal connections, to let students know that they are liked and respected, and to reinforce the notion that it is alright to make mistakes as long as the effort is there. I have taken these approaches to the classroom and so far they have worked extremely well at getting students to participate. However, I am very intrigued by the notion of SA and individual goal-setting and this article has sparked some interest in identifying ways I may use these techniques in the future.

References

de Saint Léger, D. (2009). Self-assessment of speaking skills and participation in a foreign language class. *Foreign Language Annals*, 22(1), 158-178. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1944-9720.2009.01013.x>