This study aims to investigate whether explicit strategy instruction intervention (i.e., helping them learn to cope), or a "group talk" intervention (i.e., making the learning context less stressful), or both, can reduce L2 speaking anxiety in the context of unassessed spontaneous Target Language use.

**Research questions**

1. Do pupils in this context feel anxious about spontaneous Target Language use?
2. What impact does explicit strategy training have on learners’ anxiety levels during spontaneous oral communication tasks? Which of these methods in particular do pupils find the most helpful for reducing negative stress in spontaneous TL use?
3. What impact does the use of Group Talk have on learners’ stated levels of anxiety during spontaneous MFL speaking? Which of these methods in particular do pupils find the most helpful for reducing negative stress in spontaneous TL use?
4. Does a combination of the two bring about the optimum level reduction in oral communication anxiety?
5. What further suggestions do pupils and teachers have about decreasing anxiety?

**Project outline**

**Participants:** 3 Year 9 French classes and one Year 8 French class taught by myself and a colleague.

**Interventions:** Group 1’s intervention was in the form of explicit strategy instruction for coping with anxiety through 1) anxiety reduction, 2) self-encouragement, 3) peer support, 4) activities that relate personally to learners, and 5) activities that facilitate individual and community achievement.

**Background**

Oral communication, is regarded as an essential skill to be learnt in the pursuit of second language acquisition. In Liu & Littlewood’s study (1997), when university students and teachers were asked to choose two features (out of a choice of ten) that they considered most important for successful spoken academic communication, both parties agreed that unplanned, spontaneous speech was the most important.

Yalçin and Inceçay (2014) report that anxious foreign language students identify speaking in the target language as the most frightening language skill. The pattern of evidence generated from the large group of studies on human communication in general suggests that oral communication anxiety typically leads to a consistent pattern of communication avoidance or withdrawal from situations where communication is likely to occur.

Horwitz et al have provided a suggestion [1986: p131]: “In general, educators have two options when dealing with anxious students: 1) they can help them learn to cope with the existing anxiety-provoking situation; or 2) they can make the learning context less stressful.”

One qualitative investigation (amongst an overwhelming majority of quantitative research) by Samimy and Rardin (1994) on 100 learners with a community language learning setting confirmed existing research which indicates that language learning anxiety can be responded to positively by approaches, methods and techniques which focus on: 1) a supportive environment, 2) a non-judgmental teacher attitude, 3) peer support, 4) activities that relate personally to learners, and 5) activities that facilitate individual and community achievement.

Though the nature of strategy use and frequency of their use depend to some degree on both specific classroom contexts and on student proficiency levels a review of the literature has found that specific strategy training that focuses on raising learners’ awareness of such positive strategies can decrease levels of anxiety.

**Initial findings:**

- Pupils at this school were neither particularly stressed nor especially comfortable in speaking the L2: In the Likert Scale pre-intervention questionnaires, the average answer to the statement “I feel confident when I speak French in class” was 3.02, closest to the “neither agree nor disagree” reaction.
- Overall confidence levels went down after explicit affective strategy intervention: Pupil and teacher interviews revealed that this method was seen as impractical, patronising and placed in students’ minds the idea that they should be nervous. The least popular strategy across all of the groups taught strategies in both their pre and post intervention questionnaires was “monitoring emotions”. However, strategy training had the most positive effect on anxious students, for example in Group 2 pupil 13 and pupil 17’s low confidence levels more than doubled with strategy training.
- Making the learning context less stressful had observable positive results on all pupils: Across all classes but the control group, in pre intervention questionnaires, participants agreed or strongly agreed that this would help them feel less stressed about speaking. In all questionnaires, this was the more popular of the two methods for reducing anxiety. 91.5% of all 106 questionnaires filled out were either agreed, or strongly agreed that “a non-judgmental teacher helps me feel less stressed”, more popular than the importance of group work, as suggested in the literature.
- A mix and match approach to both methods should be considered for pupils on an individual basis: Whilst students and teachers stated that a combination of methods would bring about the optimum level reduction in oral communication anxiety, the strategy training had a detrimental impact on the gains made from the less stressful context in the class who received training in both. Therefore further research is planned to identify how best a mixed-method approach could work best for all pupils.
- Both methods were seen as no replacement for simply practising speaking the L2: Data from all research tools indicates that this was seen as the best way for reducing oral communication anxiety.

**References**


