



Confident Readership in Second Language Acquisition

Research Agenda

Language learning – and in particular ancient language learning – is traditionally all about *rules*. But no human language can be entirely, or even predominantly, rule-based – even native speakers of a language are engaged in a continual process of refining and extending their knowledge! Successful language learning, then, involves discovering how to deal appropriately with unknown, irregular, and/or original linguistic usage. And it is at this point that the quality of ‘confident readership’ becomes important: learners must be prepared to make educated guesses based on limited language knowledge in order to progress in understanding and fluency.

The purpose of the TfLN’s/Faculty of Classics’ research is to determine what factors serve to create this quality of ‘confident readership’ – and how best to promote it in student learning.

Methodology

Since the start of the project in February 2007, research has focused on student self-perceptions of confidence in their own reading. The chief research instrument used has been a series of web-based surveys developed to assess students’ opinions regarding both their own competence and teaching practice. These have been complemented by a series of semi-structured interviews designed to achieve more detailed responses and finer-grained analysis than allowed by surveys alone.



Findings

Student responses to both questionnaires and interview questions clearly identify two chief criteria by which reflexive evaluation is performed.

The first is *cognitive*: students assess their progress against a perceived norm of fluency, comprehension, and detail of understanding. The sources of this norm are various, but among the most important are: the influence of trusted schoolteachers; previous exam papers; and apparently self-generated internal expectations.

The second criterion is *social* – i.e., students measure themselves against the perceived competence of their peers.

Analysis

From the limited research carried out thus far, it appears plain that the role of self-confidence in ‘confident readership’ varies with the criterion of self-confidence adopted.

With regard to purely cognitive criteria, there in fact appears to be a slight negative correlation between self-confidence in one’s own linguistic ability, and this ability as measured in examination scores. This finding is in keeping with the observations of Kruger and Dunning (1999) regarding the role of subject-specific knowledge in self-assessment of expertise: in many domains – such as grammar – ‘the skills that engender competence are often the very same skills necessary to evaluate competence’. Unskilled readers, in other words, lack sufficient knowledge to see that they are making mistakes, and therefore often enjoy higher linguistic confidence despite – or rather because of – their lack of knowledge.

When attention is turned to social criteria, however, it is clear that a lack of confidence in this domain has sometimes strongly and negatively affected learning at the Faculty. Students who perceive themselves as less competent than their peers readily abandon foundational and long-term learning objectives in favour of quickly acquired and superficial knowledge (e.g. cribbed translations) which they feel will conceal their ignorance from their peer group. In the worst-case scenario, several (or all) members of a one group can suffer from this negative self-assessment, leading to an ever-inflating cycle of superficial knowledge display destructive to any real linguistic progress.

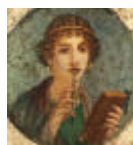
Outcomes

In order to maximise the positive aspects of confidence in language learning, both the cognitive and social aspects of self-assessment will be addressed. Although the two are distinct phenomena, both are responsive to the provision of an external standard of excellence against which the student can measure him or herself. It is hypothesised that if students are presented with clearly-defined evaluative benchmarks:

- a. *on a cognitive level*, they will be in a position to form an accurate idea of their own linguistic strengths and weaknesses – and thus be better able to self-correct independently.
- b. *on a social level*, the relevance of peer-group judgements will be minimised – giving students the freedom to pursue their own learning needs without reference to the (often-exaggerated) attainments of others and facilitating meaningful in-class interaction.

As a result, the Faculty of Classics is piloting a series of three evaluations for 1A students to help them monitor their progress over the course of the year. With feedback from these evaluations functioning as a reference for self-assessment, students should develop not only enhanced linguistic ability, but also an improved capacity for self-monitoring – and thus the basis for future linguistic independence. In addition, this evaluation feedback should diminish the gap under-confident students perceive between their own abilities and those of their peers – a development that will allow class interactions to foster rather than stifle individual attainment through encouraging confidence and peer-mentoring.

The Future



Research so far has concentrated on measuring global linguistic confidence. But confidence is also hypothesised to play a significant role in specific aspects of language learning such as vocabulary-guessing, idiom comprehension, and literary interpretation. Research instruments are therefore about to be developed for the analysis of the role of confidence in the development of these ‘micro-skills’. The relationship between confidence in these restricted areas and its expression in perceived self-competence can then be explored in detail – and the foundation laid for a student language knowledge both critically aware of its own shortcomings, and prepared to resolve them by pushing forward into unknown linguistic