

Willingness to Communicate

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MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei, & Noels (1998) state that a language program that fails to induce a willingness to communicate in the L2 is simply a failed program. This statement has very wide and sweeping implications for L2 courses and programs. During a weekend seminar in Tokyo, Japan (Feb.2005), MacIntyre defended this statement by using an analogy that any architecture course that produced students who could not design or build structures was a failed program. It is very hard to argue with that analogy. One could then go across a broad spectrum of fields to say the same thing. Any medical program which fails to produce competent doctors and nurses is a failed program. In fields where there is a chance for any failure producing a cataclysmic ending, it is hard to find fault with the reasoning of MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei & Noels.

I grew up in rural Saskatchewan and speaking from my own experience with learning French, I would have to say, that I agree with the statement above. I studied French in Jr. High School for three years and one year in High School. I cannot communicate in French at all. Our French teacher did not speak or understand French; the teacher was assigned to teach French at the beginning of the school year and ability in French was not a consideration in the assignment of that teaching role. Therefore looking at the statement above, I would have to say that had the school board had access to MacIntyre, Clement, Dornyei & Noels, it is quite possible that some of the more political figures on the board could have used the statement to get French courses and

programs thrown out of our local schools. There was a strong contingent of supporters of unilingualism with a bias against all things French; and having this kind of information would have given them more fuel to add to the fires that they kept igniting. Although my own experience was gained over twenty years ago and I have been out of Saskatchewan for some time since then, I would surmise that French language instruction probably has not changed significantly these last twenty years.

During the weekend seminar, MacIntyre used the analogy of architecture students so I feel that I can also use it to make my own arguments. Using the extreme position of a "failed program", it is entirely likely that any architect that failed to build a safe building would be liable - not only professionally negligent but criminally negligent. It is therefore evident that my teachers should be held accountable for my lack of ability to function using the French language, as should the Saskatchewan Government for failing to ensure that all students in the province were not given the opportunity to study and learn French in a successful program. Dr. MacIntyre and others had better keep their calendars free, as the number of litigators calling them as material witnesses could grow exponentially!

During the summer of 1976 I also attended a hockey school. Could the same statement run true for it? I know of no one who made it to the National Hockey League or other major leagues from the hockey school. Should I be able to get my money back? I took golf lessons in the summer of 1989, but I still have my slice and I still look like I am stick handling on the greens instead of putting. Is it fair to say these two schools were failed programs?

These are perhaps extreme positions, but they were opened by the original position of MacIntyre and others (1998). Extreme positions usually come back to haunt us. MacIntyre and others were being provocative in making this statement. I believe that none of them would suggest that French classes should be terminated across Canada or that English programs here in Japan

should be eliminated because they do not produce students who are willing to communicate. On the surface this statement was a slap in the face to all language teachers here in Japan and to all of the French teachers I have had in Canada. We now need to look at the intended meaning of this statement. I believe it was made to encourage teachers and program designers to look more critically at their existing programs to see if they might do something which would encourage more successfully the willingness to communicate in their students.

If we define willingness to communicate to mean “the intention to initiate communication given the opportunity,” then at the onset teachers here in Japan are going to have failed programs. In Japan, students do not have access to native speakers of English in the outside setting as much as say Anglophones learning the French language do in places like Ottawa. Here in Japan it is very likely that the native English speaking teacher is the only access to authentic language that many of the students are likely to encounter.

Clement (1980), writing about the prerequisites for second language acquisition, claimed that contact with target language users and linguistic confidence were two variables of paramount importance for learners. As mentioned, EFL courses in many parts of the world then are going to be failed programs as the first of the two variables is just not present for most of the students. Not only are the chances of communication in English very limited in Japan but there are also cultural differences which have a direct bearing on a student’s willingness to communicate.

In the present framework of willingness to communicate MacIntyre uses a pyramid to look at the different traits that help determine a student’s willingness to communicate. This model of willingness to communicate evolved from Gardner’s socioeducational model which was used to illustrate student’s motivation for using a second language. In Gardner’s model there are five variables; the first was integrative orientation. It is believed that if a student

wishes to be perceived as a member of the target language group, then the student will be more likely to be willing to communicate with the target language group. Here in Japan that is not the case. As Yashima, Zenuk-Nishide and Shimizu (2004) have suggested “Japanese youth typically have dual orientations in studying English: a short-term goal related to examinations and grades, and a somewhat vague long-term objective related to using English for international/intercultural communication.” Typically Japanese students do not see themselves as trying to integrate with speakers from the target language. Yashima (2002) points out that the “applicability of the socioeducational model in the foreign language context has been questioned by some researchers.” Yashima (2002) also claimed that “English seems to represent something vaguer and larger than the American community in the minds of young Japanese learners.” Those factors led them to postulate that there was something different between the modals proposed by MacIntyre et al. in the Canadian context and the one that they faced in Japan. Yashima (2002) found that for many Japanese students “English symbolizes the world around Japan, something that connects them to foreign countries and foreigners...with whom they can communicate by using English.” This difference Yashima called “international posture.” Cultural differences also play a significant role in our students’ willingness to communicate. There are differences that go beyond individual differences as well, and we have touched upon one of them, though, in this paper we will not go beyond this point.

It is now time to go back to MacIntyre’s original statement that “any program that fails to produce students who are willing to communicate is a failed program.” As stated before, I believe that this statement was made to be provocative. It was made to make educators aware and to encourage the teachers of EFL in trying to promote programs that produce more students who are willing to communicate. What can teachers do that might motivate students to becoming more willing to communicate? There have been many

incursions into this as researchers and teachers start to co-operate. I stress 'start' because most of the time researchers and teachers in the classroom live in completely different worlds. Researchers have the advantage because they are able to have open time tables, whereas teachers have to follow the guidelines of administration, as well as curriculums, and also teach towards some test for assigning a grade to students. Researchers are removed from the constraints of the classroom and can look at the ideal learning situation.

The ideal learning situation usually is not found in a school. So how do teachers try to build a more learning friendly course for the students? There is a lot of research available which would help the teacher build such a course. Giving the students more autonomy in what they study is one area which has generated more emphasis on student orientated classes. Because the students are studying areas of interest to them they are much more 'into' learning. Autonomy gives the students the motivation to push themselves farther than they would have been pushed by a traditional language class. Ushioda (2000) also claimed that reflection upon the learning situation also helped the students realize "its personal benefits and motivational appeal" and helped "to raise their awareness of the underlying principles of autonomy and reciprocity." This makes sense in any field. If someone is interested in what they are learning they are motivated to learn by the content alone. This intrinsic motivation helps the students to expand their horizons and push themselves further. Getting the students to become self-motivated is a goal of any good teacher. Ushioda (2000) said "in any learning context then, the development of students' capacity for autonomy must go hand in hand with the engagement of their intrinsic motivation."

There are many things that I like to do in my classes which foster this autonomy. In one class I had learner centers set up where students take virtual tours of places they want to visit. The students go to a 'travel agent', book a flight, and look up the places they want to visit. The students then report

on their tour on a web page. I then pose as someone who is interested in going to the same place and pose questions to the students. They have to research and then report their answers back to me via the web. This has worked well in motivating the students to research a place that they are interested in and to report their findings back to the class. Doing it on the computers also limits their anxiety about using English, as most of my students are not that proficient in English.

I use this to promote a “willingness to communicate” (even though I had not heard of the concept before MacIntyre’s seminar in Tokyo.) Using something which interests the students and is relevant to them is vitally important. That said though, I would doubt that my students would initiate communication about the topics. There is only so much we can do in a classroom and hopefully giving the students a little taste of learning autonomously will encourage them to continue to do so outside the classroom. This is just one activity that I use to help promote learning in the classroom. It is my hope that communicating over the net will give the students a feeling of success which, hopefully, will help build their confidence to talk face to face about their topics later in the year.

Motivation and a ‘willingness to communicate’ seem very valid learning goals for any classroom of EFL. I would not say my classes are failures and I hope that the students can go on and have very positive experiences learning English. I can only do so much for them with time constraints while also helping them prepare for exams which they must pass. Schools can be learning centers and that would be a worthy goal for all serious educators.

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