FACT SHEET 1: BUILDING CONFIDENCE IN THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

Introduction
Developing confidence is an important part of language learning. In this fact sheet we explore what we mean by confidence and look at some models that have been used to explain how it works. In Building Confidence Fact Sheets 2 and 3 we look at how we can build learners’ confidence inside the classroom and prepare them for communicating beyond the classroom, while in Fact Sheet 4 we look at linking the classroom to the community and community participation. An annotated bibliography in Fact Sheet 5 describes some of the practical and theoretical publications that teachers might find useful as they help learners become more confident speakers of English.

What is confidence?
Confidence is not an easy concept to define. Generally, it describes a mental attitude that focuses on trust and reliance on oneself and often includes notions of self-assurance, boldness and fearlessness. For the ESL learner, confidence is defined as a form of self-reliance and is often linked to self-esteem and motivation. It is viewed as a social aspect of language teaching and part of the personal attributes of the language learner.

Why is confidence important?
Being a confident language learner means being able to use English in different social and transactional contexts and with people from different cultural and professional backgrounds. Confident language learners feel happy and comfortable with the progress they are making and this gives them confidence to keep learning, and this confidence can have a significant impact on their lives both inside and outside the classroom. Learners who are more confident are more easily able to participate in social activities, volunteer in the community, find a job, talk with their neighbours and play key roles in their communities.

Nfumu is a young man from Congo who wants to be a community worker and perhaps, in the future, an elected member of the Australian parliament! Since completing the AMEP, Nfumu has enrolled in a Biomedical Science degree at the University of Tasmania. He is an active member of the Tasmanian African community, participating in and organising multicultural events and volunteering as a radio announcer for community/ethnic radio. As a confident speaker of English, Nfumu also participates as a volunteer in local youth development organisations that address issues of global poverty.
An important ingredient in developing confidence is the ability of learners to see the progress in their language learning so that they gain a sense of achievement. This can be a vital part of understanding the language learning process as a whole, and can help to keep learners motivated and on track for what is, after all, a very long journey.

Alina felt like a stranger when she first arrived in Australia but now that she is working for a large company, she feels that she has ‘started to live again’. Now she socialises with her workmates, drives and loves to go shopping. She feels a strong sense of achievement, particularly when she received an employee’s award for her hard work at the company’s Christmas dinner cruise.

Confidence can be fostered in language learners at any proficiency level: confident learners are usually more effective, happier learners, whatever their level. They are more likely to take risks when they communicate with others and are therefore more likely to have conversations in English, and this, in turn, is likely to help their language to improve. With better English, they will be more willing to seek out more interactions in English, the interactions are more likely to be successful, and this success will help to build their confidence, and so on. Confidence and competence therefore depend very closely on each other.

Dan is an Arabic speaker whose confidence in speaking English increased after he started his AMEP course: ‘When I came here and joined the class, I was very happy … you are talking lots of English in a very short time which is very good. I found it makes me more confident’. Dan believes that the practice he gained in speaking English in the classroom helped him to practise English outside the classroom where he could listen to ‘normal’ people speak colloquial English.

Understanding confidence
We all know that some people get very anxious when they are learning a language, and of course allaying these fears and anxieties is a very important part of building confidence. But in addition to counteracting negative feelings, building confidence also means building positive feelings. Learners also need to feel:

- secure
- competent
- a sense of belonging
- a strong sense of identity
- a sense of purpose.
Developing confidence in the classroom is about promoting these feelings and providing learners with strategies to succeed in their language learning while reducing any negative beliefs about their worth and abilities as an L2 speaker.

Below we look briefly at some of the ways that the issue of confidence in learning and using a language has been treated in research and teaching approaches.

**Foreign language anxiety**
Research into Foreign Language Anxiety (FLA) has been undertaken most famously by Horwitz et al. (1986), who take as a starting point a lack of confidence. This work investigates the responses of largely adult EFL learners on a *Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale*. Studies have identified a range of factors in FLA, including apprehension when speaking to others, performance anxiety and fear of negative evaluation by other students and teachers. They argue that FLA is a serious obstacle to language learning and suggest that teachers can help to alleviate these feelings and start to build confidence by acknowledging learners’ fears and feelings of helplessness.

Hannah from Korea feels nervous about making phone calls in English. She also feels uncomfortable when having to speak to her husband’s English-speaking friends when they come to visit. They ‘speak too quickly’ and she feels ‘stupid’ because she does not understand their jokes.

**Willingness to Communicate**
The Willingness to Communicate (WTC) framework was developed by Burgoon (1976) and McCroskey and Richmond (1991) and elaborated by MacIntyre, Clement, Dörnyei and Noels (1998) in a bid to understand more about the factors that impinge on whether or not a learner is able or willing to communicate in the L2. In this approach, confidence is not viewed as fixed or static, but dynamic and fluid: it can ebb and flow according to circumstances.

Two aspects of WTC are seen as making an important contribution to learners’ confidence in an L2:
- *cognitive* – learners’ self-evaluation or perception of their proficiency in their L2
- *emotional* – the level of anxiety that learners feel when communicating in their L2.

And two distinct levels of confidence are identified:
- a *general confidence* communicating in the L2
- a *situation-specific confidence* which can vary according to the context.

As we can see from the following story of Corazon from Columbia, her general level of confidence in English is quite high so that she is willing to ‘have a go’ in most situations.
However, in the particular situation of speaking on the telephone, she feels much less confident.

Corazon sometimes feels embarrassed when she is speaking English (e.g. if she forgets words), but she is always happy to give it a try. One thing she still has a problem with is using the telephone; she has a hard time understanding English speakers. She often doesn’t answer the phone at her house if she doesn’t recognise the number of a Spanish speaking friend.

Many factors impact on a learner’s general and situation-specific WTC. These include the level of familiarity with interlocutors, the number of speakers present, the formality of the situation and the topics being discussed. Other factors include the desire to communicate with a specific interlocutor, and the personality and interpersonal motivation of the learner.

**Reflection point**

1) How confident do you feel about speaking with others in the languages that you speak?

2) Are there some situations in which you feel more confident than others?

3) What are the situations in which you feel less confident and why?

**Possible selves**

A recent approach to understanding motivation in language learners, developed by Dörnyei (2007) and colleagues, draws on the psychological concept of the ‘possible self’. The idea is that learners are motivated by three different conceptions of themselves:

- the ‘ideal self’ – a potential and idealised self or self-guide representing what the learner wants to become
- the ‘ought to’ self – representing what the learner thinks they ought to become
- the ‘fear of’ self – representing what the learner is afraid of becoming.
Learners can be powerfully motivated both by what they want to become through speaking English, as in the case of Lucia, and also by the kind of person they fear they will become if they do not manage to learn English well, as both Lucia and Rita told us.

Lucia did not ‘feel herself’ when her partner’s family and friends did not understand her when she was talking in English. She described herself as being ‘like a robot’ and feared being thought of as ‘the shy Columbian’. The image of her ideal self was to be as proficient an English speaker as she is a Spanish speaker and to work as a marketing professional as she had done in Columbia. Two years after arriving in Australia, she described herself as being in a period of ‘transition’ and that she would eventually get to her desired ideal self. A few months later, Lucia reinvented herself and wanted to study community development: ‘I would love to have more like a social foundation instead of just go and work for a company trying to sell something’.

Rita from Mexico was concerned that her English might not improve like a student in her class who had been in Australia for 10 years: ‘I think, oh my god, maybe this is my future but I don’t like it’.

Reflection point

Think back to when you were studying a language or some other challenging area of knowledge. How far were you motivated by an ideal view of yourself (an ‘ideal self’) that encouraged you to strive for success? Were you also motivated by a feeling of what you ought to do (‘ought to’ self) or a fear of what you would be if you did not succeed (‘fear of’ self)? How did this affect your confidence?

By drawing on their hopes and desires, perhaps from powerful role models, learners can develop a dynamic and forward-looking conception of themselves (or the opposite). This can influence their expectations of themselves and help them to recognise and overcome potential obstacles. This approach suggests the importance of developing a repertoire of concrete action plans in order to understand and pursue future learning pathways and of setting goals for an individualised study plan, together with specific instructions on how to meet them.
The power of positive suggestion
Some teaching approaches have even gone so far as to advocate that learners be assigned new identities in the classroom as a way of encouraging self-belief and abandoning the doubts, insecurities and failures of their past lives. Promoted as a way of enhancing language learning by discouraging damaging views that language learning is difficult, Suggestopaedia was developed by a Bulgarian educator, Georgi Lozanov, in the 1970s (Bowen, n.d.). Practitioners believed that by helping their learners to think positively about their language learning and their lives, they would relax, and that this would help them to focus more clearly, become more receptive and learn more efficiently. Although Suggestopaedia has fallen out of fashion as a language teaching methodology, the kernel of the approach – that relaxed and happy students learn better – is relevant.

Reflection point

1. What do you think about the power of positive suggestion? What are its benefits/limits? How could you use it in the classroom?

2. Some people say that they work better under pressure. Do you think that you learn better if you are relaxed or a little stressed? Give some specific examples.

Why do some learners lack confidence?
There are many reasons why a learner may lack confidence. These include aspects of their personality, a sense of overload as they struggle with the demands of settlement in a new country, the impact of difficult life experiences, or an incomplete or unrealistic understanding of what language learning entails, how long it takes and the frustrations as well as triumphs that it involves. We look at each of these sets of factors briefly below.

Personality
Some people may be more prone to feeling anxious about things in general or about language learning in particular. Such feelings may be exacerbated by the other factors listed below, and be better or worse in different situations.

A sense of overload
Immigrants to a new country are immediately assaulted by a whole array of new experiences, places, names, people, customs, food etc. With so many new things to encounter and learn about, they can feel tired and bewildered, even if the experience is positive. Actions that used to be simple can suddenly become very complicated as immigrants realise that things are done differently in their new environment. Something as simple as buying basic food or catching a
bus can take much longer than it used to, and this can put a considerable strain on a learner’s time and on their cognitive resources.

In addition, immigrants have to deal with all the demands of settling in a new place, including finding somewhere to live, helping children to settle etc., as well as dealing with emotions resulting from culture shock, community reactions, or worries about relatives in other places.

**Difficult life experiences**
Many immigrants have faced tremendous difficulties before arriving in Australia. Many refugees, for example, have faced torture or trauma in the countries they have fled, and their routes to safety have often been long and hazardous. Even those whose immigration journeys were relatively straightforward will probably have spent many months – if not years – preparing for their trip, and will have experienced considerable upheaval. These factors can seriously undermine a learner’s confidence.

Ara from Iran feels that her language learning is affected by concentration and memory difficulties arising from the long period in a camp when she did not use her brain very much: ‘The thing is now that we are out, when we learn something it seems that it stays there for a short while and it goes away, it fades away.’

They may also have to deal with a wide variety of feelings and reactions to their new life. It is a big shock to many well-educated, professional migrants, for example, to find that where they used to have status and a respected place in society, they now feel out of place, under-valued and sometimes patronised.

In her native home of India, Nymph completed a degree in engineering and has qualifications and experience working in IT. In Australia she works as checkout operator and although she enjoys her job, she hopes to return to the field of IT because it is more prestigious and she can earn more money. She told us: ‘I want to go into IT because my studies will be waste, there won’t be any (fun of) doing such a hard work to get your certificates, or those degrees, so I want to have a job there’.

For learners who have had little or very unsuccessful schooling experiences in the past, the task of formal classroom learning can be particularly daunting.

**Incomplete understanding of language learning**
The long and challenging route to fluency in a language can be very dispiriting for learners who do not really understand what it means to learn a language or exactly how to go about it. They may have unrealistic expectations of how long it actually takes to become competent, which
means they can lose confidence and blame themselves when they see others who are more proficient than they are.

Dibya is a Nepalese woman who has resigned herself to the idea that she will never achieve a good level of English proficiency. Through an interpreter she told us: ‘I don’t understand anything, even though in the class when the teacher is speaking, I don’t understand anything and in the workplace I will not be able to understand’.

This makes it especially important that learners understand that language learning is a long and complicated business, and that sometimes they will be able to speak or understand very well, but at other times they will not be able to, and that this is normal. It is also important that they understand the kinds of things they can do themselves to learn effectively so that they do not rely exclusively on the teacher or on formal class texts.

Sabeen has found it difficult to adjust to the AMEP because in her native home of Jordan teachers followed a set English language teaching textbook. She finds it confusing that in Australia, she receives new handouts each lesson but there is no book.

**Frustration and loss of face**
Some learners find it particularly challenging to ‘go back to school’, and this can sap their confidence. They may:

- feel foolish in front of classmates
- find it very frustrating that they can no longer express themselves fully
- find they need much more time to consider answers in class.

Amir from Iran has felt frustrated with his performance in the ESL classroom. He explained how he feels nervous about attending classes and on one occasion he could see the teacher’s mouth moving but could not understand anything that she was saying. Amir became very anxious, fainted and had to see a doctor and psychiatrist about his anxiety.

**The consequences of losing confidence**

- Learners who are not confident may be perceived as less competent because they may be reluctant to participate in conversations or activities. Less confident learners may:
  - have mental blocks in speaking activities
  - have difficulty self-correcting when they make a mistake
  - use avoidance strategies rather than engaging or taking risks
  - forget what they have learned very easily.
A final word...

An essential part of the teacher’s role is to build confidence in their learners, particularly those whose experiences or circumstances have made them feel insecure. It is therefore important to develop strong rapport, not only between the teacher and the learner, but also among the learners themselves in order to create a supportive learning environment in the classroom.

In Building Confidence Fact Sheet 2, we suggest some strategies and activities that teachers can use to build confidence in the classroom and foster an environment where learners feel safe, are prepared to ‘have a go’ and have the confidence to set and pursue their own learning goals.

References

Acknowledgements
With thanks to the research team, teachers and AMEP clients who participated in the study.

© Commonwealth of Australia 2013

This work is copyright. Apart from any use permitted under the Copyright Act 1968, no part may be reproduced by any process, nor may any other exclusive right be exercised, without the permission of the Commonwealth. Requests and inquiries concerning reproduction and rights should be addressed to Department of Industry, GPO Box 9839, Canberra, ACT, 2601.