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Classroom commands and the novelty factor: What happens when a teacher gives commands in a foreign language?

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Abstract

Giving effective classroom commands is basic to fostering a positive learning environment. This investigation explored the impact of adding a novelty factor to classroom commands by delivering commands in a foreign language. Foreign language commands (FLCs) are classroom directions given in a language other than the one generally used for learning and teaching. The purpose of this primary classroom-based case study was to examine the impact FLCs had on students' response times and attitudes when learning about the culture associated with the language of the commands. Twenty-four Grade Three students in one class were exposed to FLCs for a period of five weeks. Data showing how many seconds it took for students to respond to verbal commands in both English and a foreign language were recorded over a variety of lessons. Surveys identified student attitudes towards FLCs. It was found that students responded faster to FLCs than similar English commands and demonstrated different response times to FLCs during different lessons. Variations were also noted in the attitudes of the children towards foreign language commands.

Keywords: verbal commands, teacher instructions, foreign language commands, cultural awareness, novelty, curiosity

Introduction

The ability to give successful classroom commands is one of the characteristics of effective teaching. Research indicates that verbal commands with certain characteristics increase student responses (Mandai, 2001, cited by Scoggins, 2005; Edwards & Watts, 2006; Churchill et al., 2013), and therefore enhance the learning environment. This investigation researched the effectiveness of verbal commands when a curiosity or novelty factor (Engel, 2011) was added.

The curiosity or novelty factor introduced was a foreign language, in this case, a local indigenous language. Although Australia is a multicultural society, with many languages spoken in the families represented at schools across the nation, English remains the language of education. Unlike countries such as New Zealand, where the indigenous language is taught as part of the national school curriculum, Australia's many indigenous languages have meant that few schools have adopted an indigenous

language as part of the school curriculum. While some Australian schools include foreign language study in their programs, many Australian children still have limited exposure to languages other than English.

Although what constitutes effective classroom commands has been well researched, there is less research related to adding a novelty factor, and even less when the novelty factor is the use of Foreign Language Commands (FLCs). To help close the research gap, this investigation combined FLCs in a local indigenous language with a study of the associated Narrunga culture. The key research question guiding this case study investigation was: How does the use of FLCs, combined with an integrated focus on the specific culture associated with the language, affect students' response to verbal commands within a classroom setting? A secondary question was: "What do students' attitudes towards FLCs reveal about the use of novelty with verbal commands?"

Background – Literature Review

Every day in classrooms, teachers give verbal commands. The importance of giving effective verbal commands is sometimes overlooked by teachers, yet commands help establish a positive learning environment and are an important part of teacher effectiveness. A verbal command is designed to elicit a visible response from students, yet some commands are ineffective and may not result in the desired response. Everett, Olmi, Edwards, and Tingstrom (2005) define effective commands as verbal instructions which "lead to increases in childhood compliance" (p. 48). But more than simply improving response times, Sokal, Smith, and Mowat (2003) make the claim that effective verbal commands are one of the governing factors in behaviour management, and Matthew (2012) highlights the value "of self-observation and self-evaluation of classroom instruction" (p. 208) as a key factor in improving the teaching-learning environment.

In support of Matthew (2012), Matheson and Shriver (2005) demonstrated the importance of effective verbal commands by conducting an experiment in which teachers were observed before and after they had received training on effective command delivery. They concluded that "improvements in rates of compliance and academic behaviors were observed when teachers increased their use of effective commands" (p. 213). This research supports the idea that student compliance, commonly considered the defining characteristic of instruction (Sokal, Smith, & Mowat, 2003), can be improved by the approach taken in giving commands.

The value of effective verbal commands should not be underestimated. Rieser, Fauth, Decristan, Klieme, and Büttner, (2013, citing Walberg & Anderson, 1968) highlight the importance of commands within a classroom teacher's pedagogy, commenting that throughout the past five or six decades researchers have been using classroom instructions as a means to measure teacher quality, therefore indicating the important role that verbal commands play in effective teaching.

Characteristics of effective verbal commands

Verbal commands form an important component of both classroom management and learning. Whether teachers are delivering behavioural commands such as, "Everyone listen", or a learning command like, "The inverted commas go here", the literature indicates some common characteristics that are indicative of effective classroom commands. These characteristics relate to tone of voice, length of command, choice of words, eye contact and affirmation for responding promptly. Table 1 is a compilation of these characteristics taken from current research and teacher education textbooks. While this list of characteristics is not exhaustive, it provides an adequate guide. Close examination of this table reveals that both the content of the command and the manner in which it is conveyed have bearing on the effectiveness of the command.

The first three characteristics: proximity, eye contact and tone of voice relate to the manner in which the command is given, that is, what the teacher does to increase the likelihood that students will pay attention to the command. The second two characteristics; length and clarity of the command, help

students retain what they hear and therefore assist them to respond appropriately. The five second latency period allows time for students to process the command and act on it, and the final characteristic of praise for a suitable response, affirms appropriate behaviour and sets the scene for continued compliance in the future.

Table 1: Characteristics of effective verbal commands

Characteristics of effective verbal commands	Supporting research
Close proximity of teacher to students	Mandai (2001, cited by Scoggins, 2005)
Eye contact	Mandai (2001, cited by Scoggins 2005); Edwards & Watts (2006)
Calm, low-toned but firm voice	Mandai (2001, cited by Scoggins 2005); Mattheson & Shriver (2005); Edwards & Watts (2006); Churchill et al. (2013)
Brief and to the point	Pinheiro (2013); Mattheson & Shriver (2005); Edwards & Watts (2008); Churchill et al. (2013)
Descriptive wording of relevant information, clarity	Mandai (2001, cited by Scoggins 2005); Pinheiro (2013); Mattheson & Shriver (2005) Hattie (2012)
Five second latency period following command	Mandai (2001, cited by Scoggins 2005); Mattheson & Shriver (2005); Rogers (2005)
Praise for compliance	Mandai (2001, cited by Scoggins 2005)

Having established a set of characteristics for effective verbal commands, this paper turns to exploring the possible role of curiosity and novelty in responding to commands.

The role of curiosity and novelty

Children are naturally curious beings. They are attracted to that which is novel and have an innate desire to discover. Engel (2011) defines curiosity as “simply the urge to know more...to understand the unknown” (p. 627). This desire is believed by some to be “the driving force behind lifelong learning” (Stokoe, 2012, p. 63, citing Gentry & McGinnis, 2008) and an essential life attribute. Gallagher and Lopez (2007) go further and link curiosity to well being.

The role of curiosity in learning is well established. As early as mid-twentieth century Piaget (1952) was advocating curiosity as a prerequisite to learning. He saw curiosity as a motivator to seek out new information. His ideas about curiosity are still respected in the field of education today and have been the topic of further educational research by Reio, Petrosko, Wiswell, and Thongsukmag (2006), who constructed a tri-fold model of curiosity that includes cognitive curiosity, and two types of curiosity associated with thrill seeking in both a physical and social sense. When novelty is introduced to the classroom, the curiosity generally activated is cognitive. Cognitive curiosity has the potential to motivate the desire to discover and engage students in the learning process but can be overridden by external variables (Arnone, Small, Chauncey, & McKenna, 2011). However, Emerson (2004, cited by Williamson, 2008) believes “if children are not interested in the subject-matter being taught, then they will not pay attention” (p. 383). This has the potential to mitigate the novelty factor and introduces a paradox. While

children are innately curious and therefore have an intrinsic interest in the subject matter (Burdenski & Faulkner, 2010), they also require a stimulus to increase and maintain that interest. Engel (2011) may provide the answer for increasing a student's interest in the stimulus, as he states, "curiosity involves an attraction to what is unknown, but, at the same time, children are often most curious about things with which they are somewhat familiar" (p. 627). Therefore, to engage students and to fully capitalise on their curiosity of the unknown, students need some familiarity with what is being presented. What becomes evident from the literature (Burdenski & Faulkner, 2010; Engel, 2007) is that a fine balance between the novel and the known, or a novelty/familiarity equilibrium provides the best conditions for optimal learning.

Foreign language commands

There is a scarcity of research relating to the use of FLCs in the classroom and what exists, is mostly related to teaching a foreign language. Within this context, Wallinger (2000) notes that FLCs are most successful when principles of effective verbal commands are also applied. This suggests that FLCs may only result in student response when they are delivered effectively, and are characterised by the attributes listed in Table 1. Also drawn from this context is the need for cultural sensitivity. Huda (2013) stresses the importance of sensitivity to culture, and making classroom commands culturally appropriate, to facilitate increased student learning.

The use of FLCs in primary classrooms is a little researched area. Even less researched is the effect of FLCs on student curiosity, and their consequent impact on student response rates to verbal classroom commands. The literature supports a balance between the novel and the known in learning (Burdenski & Faulkner, 2010; Engel, 2007; Williamson, 2008) but there is scant evidence of a pairing of the curiosity/familiarity equilibrium with the delivery of verbal commands.

Method

This case study was carried out over a five-week period, with twenty-four Grade Three students. A mixed method approach was adopted. This approach allowed for both timed responses and student perceptions to be recorded, providing a better opportunity to answer the research question (Cresswell, 2011; Tashakkori & Teddie, 2003) than a single mode of inquiry. The recorded response times and teacher-researcher observations, combined with student surveys filled out at the end of the five weeks provided a triangulation of data (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2011) that enhanced the trustworthiness of the results. Table 2 provides a schedule of the data collection.

Table 2: Data collection schedule

	Timed responses English 0-2 seconds	Time responses FLCs 0-2 seconds	Student information data	Student survey	Teacher- researcher observations
Week 1	✓	✓			✓
Week 2	✓	✓			✓
Week 3	✓	✓			✓
Week 4	✓	✓			✓
Week 5	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

The FLC intervention was conducted as part of the normal class program. Participation in data collection was voluntary and permission for this investigation was given by relevant authorities. During the time of the investigation, the students were studying an Australian Curriculum based History unit on the Narrunga people, created by the primary investigator. Simple Narrunga commands were delivered in an incidental fashion during Bible, Physical Education, History and Mathematics lessons, and at the start and end of each day. To ensure their effectiveness, all commands (English and Narrunga) followed the characteristics outlined in the literature (see Table 1). Literature suggests that a five second latency period following a command is ideal; however, since the verbal commands used in this study were simple instructions, a response time of two seconds or less was measured. An initial pilot test was run using both the regular class teacher and the primary researcher as the person giving commands in English. This yielded insignificant differences in response times, thus minimising the risk of data being confounded throughout the investigation by who was giving the commands.

The length of time it took for students to respond to commands was measured. A successful command was one to which students responded within two seconds. On eight occasions per day student response times were recorded to FLCs. This was repeated for English commands. A sample of student response times (fifteen in total) to English commands was recorded in the first week, providing a base-line reference from which to measure any changes. Response times to both English and FLCs were graphed over the five weeks. Emerging patterns in response times across the five weeks and between Key Learning Areas was analysed.

Additional information was gathered from student background data and a student survey. Student background information was gathered in order to identify whether a language other than English was spoken at home, and whether the cultural heritage of at least one parent was other than Australian. The student survey, given at the conclusion of the investigation, sought to gain the perceptions of the students regarding the use of a foreign language to deliver commands, as well as their attitudes to learning about the Narrunga people and their language. The survey contained both Likert scale type items and open-ended responses. The student information was mapped against the student questionnaire, creating an avenue through which findings may be partially explained.

Findings

This section of the paper presents the findings from an analysis of the various sources of data. Each data set is used to answer the research question, consequently adding to the body of knowledge about the use of FLCs as a novelty factor.

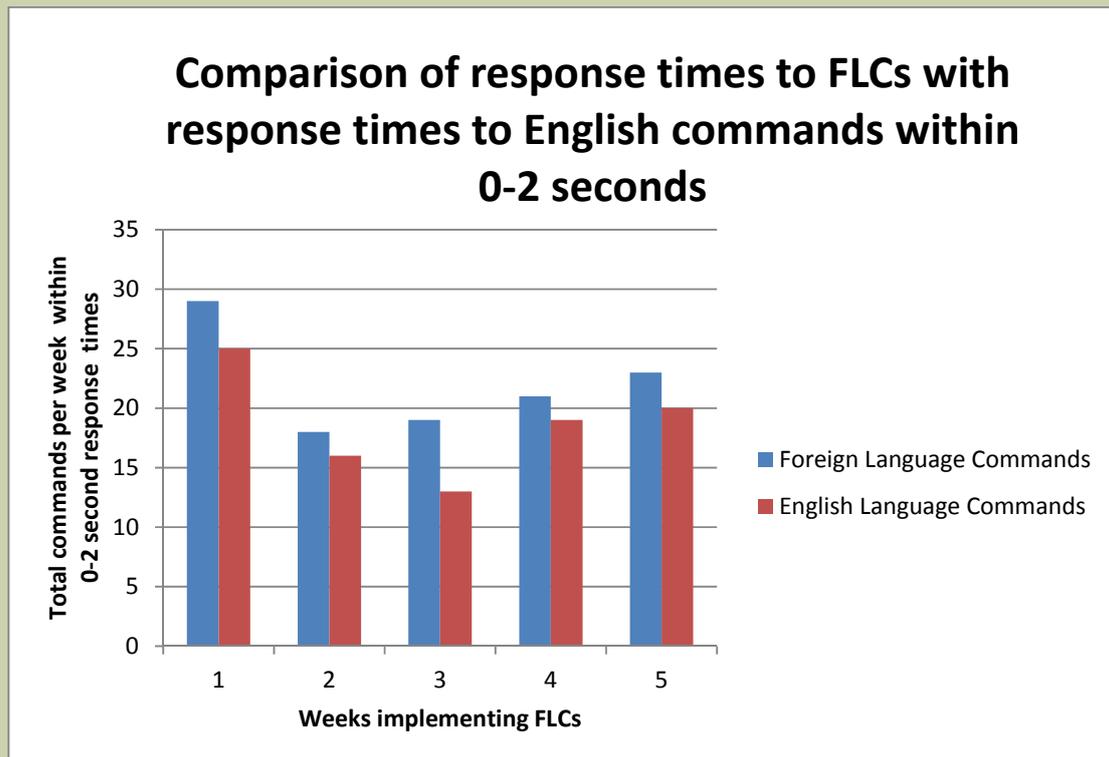
Timed responses

The data on student response times to both English and FLCs contained forty entries for each language for each week of the study. Those commands that were deemed successful (response time of less than two seconds) were plotted on a graph (see Figure 1). The data indicate a high performance peak in Week 1 and Week 5 toward both types of commands, foreign and English language, while a lull existed in Week 2 and Week 3, with a gradual improvement in Week 4 (see Figure 1). A number of anecdotal observations were noted as potentially having an effect on these findings. These included:

- High novelty factor present in Week 1.
- Observed performance factor present in Week 5. Better behaviour in researcher's last week.
- After school incident witnessed by some students at beginning of Week 2. These students became behaviourally challenging in the ensuing two weeks, which lowered the overall class timing rates as these students took longer to respond.

Nonetheless, despite the variation in response times across the five-week period, students consistently responded with slightly faster response times to FLCs compared to English commands (see Figure 1). The comparison in response times between English commands and FLCs remained fairly constant across all weeks of the investigation and demonstrates that the differences indicated did not come about by chance.

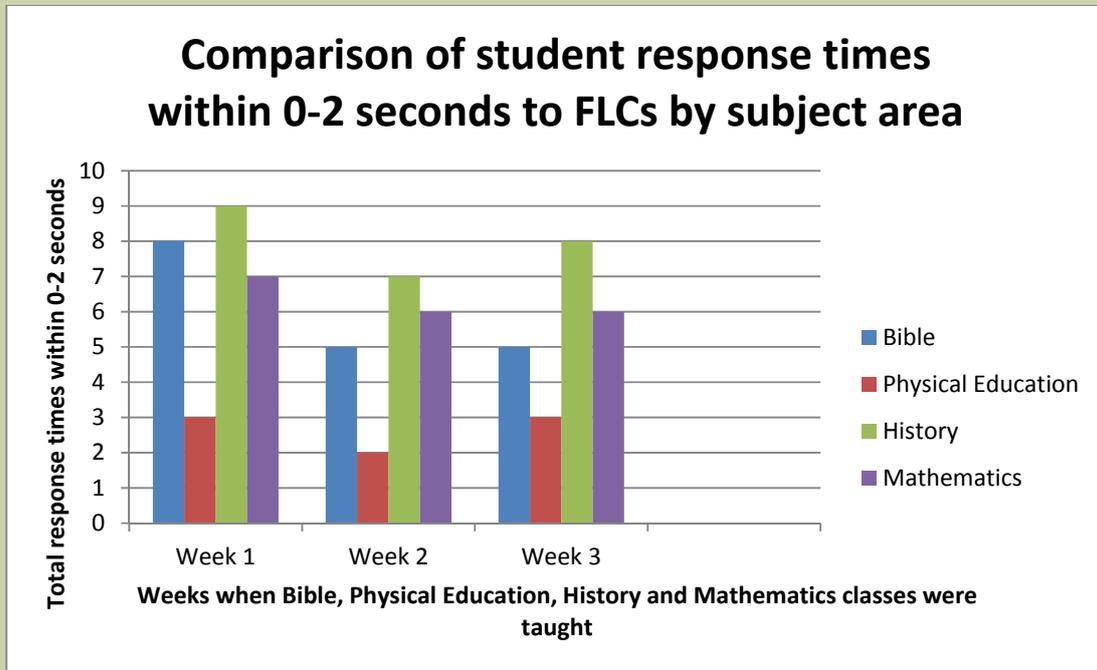
Figure 1: Comparison of response to FLCs to English commands within 0-2 seconds



Response times across Key Learning Areas

Response times for the FLCs varied across the Key Learning Areas (see Figure 2). Observation notes indicate that FLCs worked better in areas of control and quiet, compared to areas of excitement and open space. The highest number of responses within the 0-2 second range occurred during History lessons where the Narrunga culture was the topic of study. The lowest number of responses within the 0-2 second range occurred during Physical Education classes. The results for English commands were also graphed for the same time period with the same Key learning Areas; however, the results indicated no observable pattern over the three weeks.

Figure 2: Comparison of student response within 0-2 seconds to FLCs by subject area

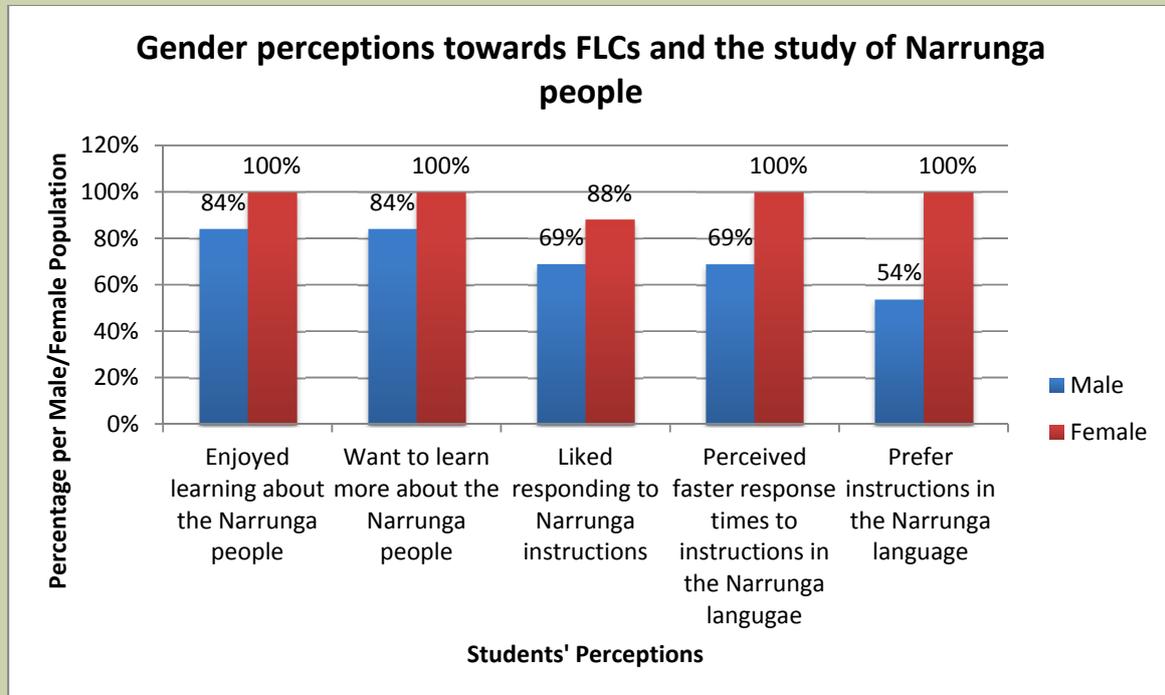


Student perceptions regarding foreign language commands

A student survey required a response to five statements (see Figure 3) relating to the study of the Narrunga culture and the use of FLCs. Overall, students reported a positive attitude towards both learning about the Narrunga people and responding to commands in the Narrunga language. Girls, however, displayed a more positive response than boys to all statements relating to both the content and the foreign language commands, as seen in Figure 3.

The student survey also offered an opportunity for an open-ended response where students could state reasons they enjoyed or did not enjoy the FLCs and learning about Narrunga people. Those who liked the use of foreign language commands cited enjoyment, ease of learning and their desire to learn another language as reasons. Those who did not like responding to instructions in another language either felt it confused them or simply stated that they did not want to learn the language of another culture.

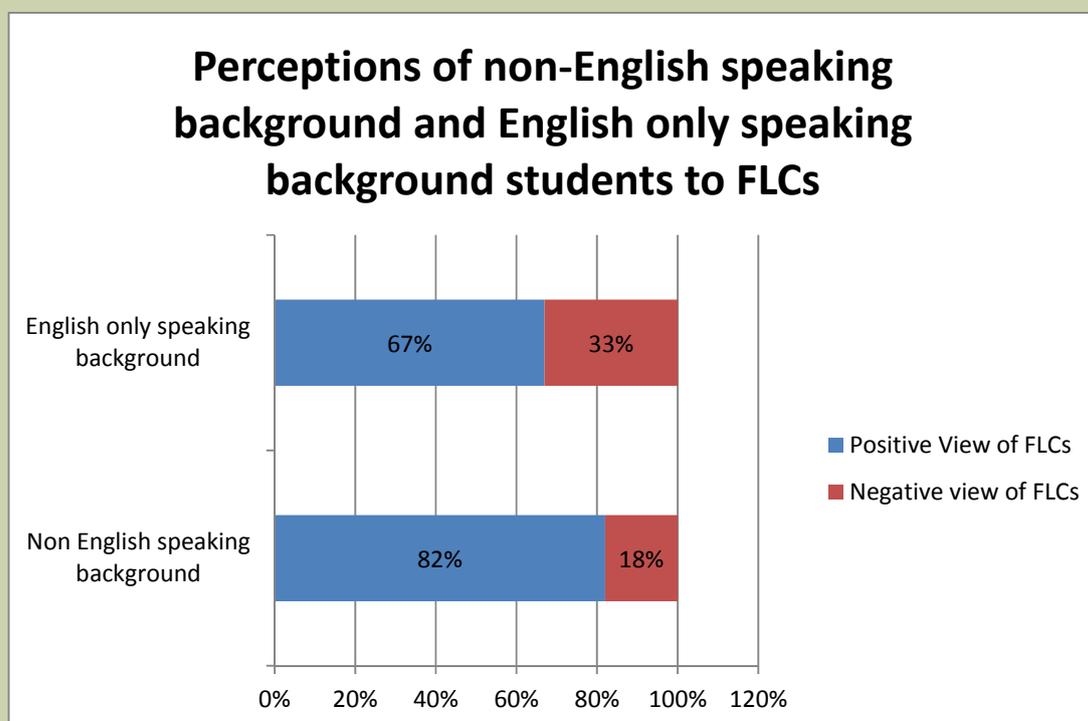
Figure 3: Gender perceptions towards FLCs and the study of Narrunga people



Student backgrounds and enjoyment of FLCs

Students' attitudes towards FLCs were further explored with the addition of student information data on language/s spoken at home. It was found that students from non-English speaking backgrounds were more likely to hold a positive view of the use of FLCs than students from an English only speaking background (82% compared to 67% respectively). Conversely, students from English only speaking backgrounds were more likely to express a negative view towards FLCs than were students from a non-English speaking background (33% compared to 18% respectively) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Perceptions of non-English speaking background and English only speaking background students to FLCs



Discussion

The results of this investigation contribute to our understanding of why student responses to FLCs, which have an in-built novelty factor, differ from commands given in English. When compared to response times for English commands across a period of five weeks and in a variety of different Key Learning Areas, FLCs consistently yielded shorter response times. This finding aligns with Reio et al. (2006) who maintain the importance of curiosity in gaining and holding attention.

The FLCs also appeared to provide the motivation to learn and retain foreign words. This substantiates the work of Arnone et al. (2011) who believe that curiosity is a strong motivator and confirms the early work of Piaget (1952) who cited curiosity as a precursor to learning.

Some variation in response times was noted across the five-week period of investigation. The shorter response times in Week 1 may be due to the novelty factor being greater. During the second and third weeks of the study, response times increased only slightly. This change was attributed to an after school incident involving students which consequently affected in-school behaviour. While this mitigating event was neither predicted nor intended, the observations indicate that the novelty factor can be overridden by external variables, a factor that was noted in the study by Arnone et al. (2011). The subsequent decrease in response times during the final week of the investigation may be partially attributed to students' desire to please the primary researcher in the final stage of the study, or alternatively, it could be that a routine was established and the commands familiar, enabling a faster response time.

In this investigation, response times were also explored across four subject areas. The shortest response times to FLCs occurred consistently in History classes. This finding supports the concept of a

novelty/familiarity equilibrium as posited by Engle (2011) and Burdenski and Faulkner (2010), who present a case for student familiarity as important for maintaining interest. In this investigation, it is believed that the initial stimulus was given by the cognitive novelty factor of the FLCs (Reio et al., 2006), but the interest was maintained when the learning content was the Narrunga people, in whose language the FLCs were given. This study may also support the work of Huda (2013), who makes a link between culture and use of verbal commands. The subject in which the FLCs were least effective was Physical Education, with the researcher observing that the outdoor space, excitement and general noise of the activity were distracting influences. These findings indicate that the novelty factor was strongest when linked to related learning and in quieter more focused learning environments. The same conclusion could not be drawn from the data gathered for response times to English commands, lending further credence to the novelty/familiarity equilibrium (Engle, 2011).

Most of the students involved in this investigation reported that they enjoyed the experience of FLCs, however, more girls reported that they enjoyed the use of FLCs than boys (88% to 67% respectively). Although curiosity was posited by Stokoe (2012) as a reason for enjoyment, this finding did not emerge from the data in this investigation. However, it could be an unrecognised factor. If this was in fact the case, then girls were either more curious about the foreign language or were less confused by it than some of the boys as girls registered a 100% agreement rate with the statement, "I prefer instructions in the Narrunga language" compared to only 54% agreement from the boys. There was no way of determining whether the gender differences in this investigation were related to the novelty factor or to another factor such as general language differences (i.e. the ability to hear and understand foreign words). However, this finding, coupled with one boy's comments that he found the FLCs "confusing", parallels the findings of Arnone et al. (2011) who reported that too much information may overwhelm curiosity. Despite their preferences, the students responded more quickly to FLCs than English commands and this may be evidence of the mitigating role of curiosity as indicated by Engel (2011).

When the enjoyment of the FLCs was mapped against the language spoken at home and the cultural makeup of the family (at least one parent speaking a language other than English in the home), it was found that students from non English speaking backgrounds were more positive towards learning foreign language words than those from an English only speaking background. While this does not completely align with Engle's (2011) novelty/familiarity equilibrium, it does suggest that certain external factors may either override the novelty factor, or as in this case, pre-condition students towards learning in a novel mode. It also raises the question of possible links between family context and openness to learning about other cultures.

Overall, the findings from this investigation indicated that FLCs were a useful tool in improving student response times to verbal commands. It demonstrated that a novelty factor can positively impact student response times. It did not identify when or if the novelty factor may decline, as response times to FLCs remained short for the five week duration of the study.

Future Research Directions

In this case study on one class, the small sample population and short time frame were limitations. Despite these constraints, a measureable decrease in the response times of students to FLCs in the Narrunga language was noted when compared to response times to the same commands delivered in English. However, further study is recommended, especially in the areas of:

- the duration of the novelty factor before curiosity is no longer a motivating factor;
- gender differences in novelty to determine if novelty or language produced the varying gender results; and
- the power of external variables to override the novelty factor.

Conclusion

While this case study cannot be generalised to a wider population, the findings, when read within the context of the literature, offer potential explanations for the short term effectiveness of FLCs in shortening student response times. Although most children enjoyed responding to FLCs, some did not, and attitudes were found to have possible links to family factors. Despite this, FLCs were found to be more effective than corresponding English language commands and were most effective when embedded in a study of the associated culture.

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