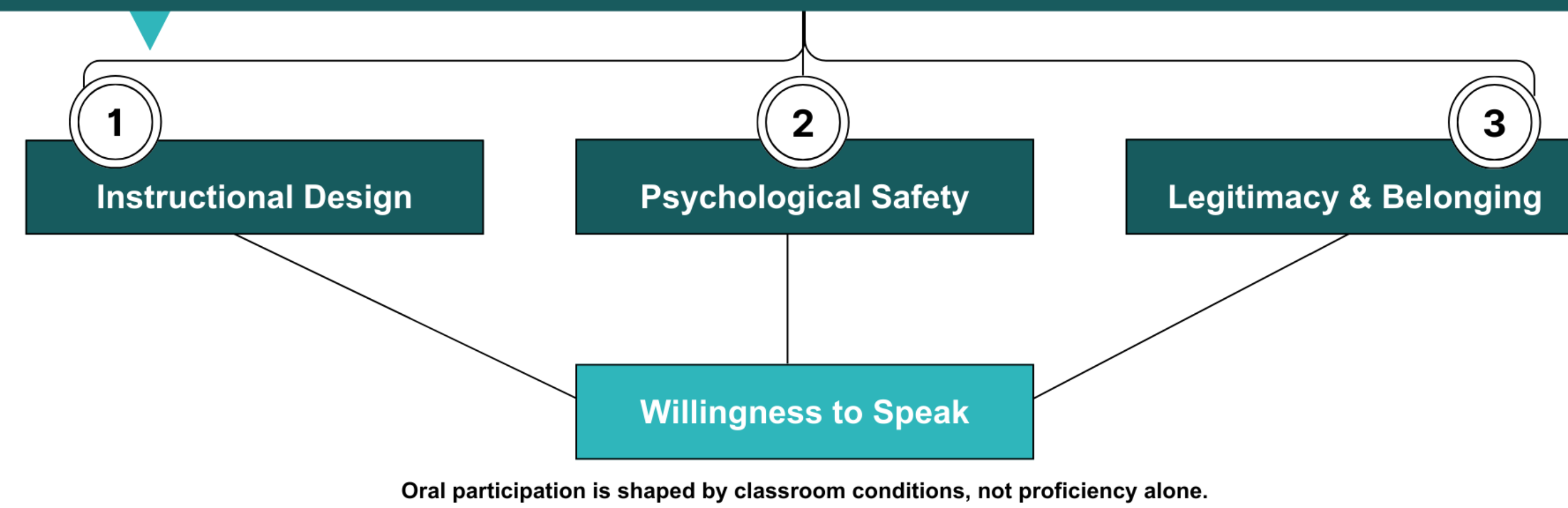


Why This Matters

Students who demonstrate strong grammatical knowledge and perform well on written assessments often hesitate when asked to speak in front of their peers. This pattern suggests that silence in French Immersion classrooms cannot be explained by linguistic proficiency alone, but must be understood through the pedagogical, relational, and affective conditions that shape participation. My capstone examines the classroom conditions that shape oral participation in middle school French Immersion.

Introduction

What Shapes Oral Participation?



Personal Lens

As a French Immersion teacher, I have seen students who are successful in written French remain silent during oral classroom tasks. This recurring tension shaped my interest in the classroom conditions that shape students' willingness to speak. My capstone draws on sociocultural and humanistic perspectives to understand oral participation as socially mediated and shaped by classroom relationships.

Significance of the Topic

Oral participation is central to language learning in French Immersion, yet many students, especially in middle school, hesitate to speak in front of peers. This matters because spoken participation is tied not only to language growth but also to confidence, belonging, and students' developing identities as French speakers.

Thesis Statement

Oral participation in middle school French Immersion is shaped by more than linguistic proficiency alone. It is also shaped by instructional design, psychological safety, and the extent to which students experience belonging and legitimacy as speakers.

Guiding Question

How do instructional practices and affective classroom conditions shape oral participation in middle school French Immersion classrooms?

Key Themes from the Literature

Oral participation is shaped by more than linguistic proficiency

Students may have the language knowledge to participate, yet still hesitate to speak in oral classroom contexts.

- **Willingness to communicate** is shaped by anxiety, peer evaluation, and perceived social risk (MacIntyre et al., 1998; Dörnyei, 2003).
- **Oral silence** does not necessarily reflect low ability or disengagement (Marshall & Bokhorst-Heng, 2020).
- Students' sense of **legitimacy as speakers** influences whether they choose to participate (Norton, 2013).

Collaborative structures can reduce the risk of speaking

Classroom interaction structures influence who speaks, when, and under what conditions.

- **Partner rehearsal** and **reciprocal pair work** reduce whole-class performance pressure (Swain, 2000; Storch, 2002).
- **Small-group discussion** creates more accessible entry points into oral participation (McDonough & Sato, 2019).
- **Structured interaction** shapes who speaks, when, and under what conditions, creating more opportunities for rehearsal and feedback (Nassaji & Wells, 2000).

Psychological safety, belonging, and legitimacy matter

Students are more likely to speak when classroom environments reduce risk and support belonging.

- **Supportive feedback** and normalized error increase willingness to participate (Edmondson, 1999; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2014).
- **Belonging** and **communicative confidence** are shaped by instructional and relational conditions. (Poljak, 2023).
- Students are more likely to participate when classroom discourse positions them as **legitimate and valued contributors** (Norton, 2013; Juríková, 2025).

Implications for Practice

Implication	Application
Structure Collaborative Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use think-pair-share, partner rehearsal, and small-group discussion before whole-class speaking. • Design tasks that position French as a shared tool for meaning-making rather than public performance. • Provide frequent opportunities for rehearsal, peer feedback, and lower-risk oral participation.
Cultivate Psychological Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalize error as part of language learning and frame mistakes as signs of engagement. • Use supportive feedback that prioritizes communication and effort over perfection. • Establish classroom norms that reduce social risk and support respectful listening.
Distribute Participation More Equitably	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do not assume participation will emerge evenly on its own. • Use routines that intentionally require and support contributions from all students. • Position all learners as legitimate French speakers whose voices are valued.

Future Direction: Further classroom-based research should examine how instructional routines shape participation, belonging, and willingness to speak over time.

Conclusion

1. Students' willingness to speak in middle school French Immersion cannot be explained by linguistic proficiency alone.
2. Collaborative interaction, psychological safety, and equitable participation structures shape oral participation.
3. When classroom conditions reduce risk and foster belonging, students are more likely to speak.

Key Takeaway: Oral participation is not simply a measure of student confidence or ability; it is a socially mediated classroom practice shaped by instructional design, psychological safety, and students' sense of legitimacy and belonging.

References

