

Down with Forced Speech

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When acquirers are forced to produce language that they have not yet acquired, known as “forced speech,” they often experience anxiety. I argue here that forced speech is not only uncomfortable, it makes no direct contribution to language acquisition.

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INTRODUCTION: ANXIETY AND FORCED OUTPUT¹

When my daughter was about five years old, she would occasionally play with a neighbor’s child of about the same age, and the parents would take turns being with the children. On one occasion, I went to the neighbor’s house to pick up both girls, while our neighbor went off to the local community college to attend a Spanish class. Just before she left, she dashed into the kitchen and poured herself some water and took a pill, clearly in a hurry. I asked her what the hurry was. She told me: “I just took a valium. I had to. It’s Spanish class, it freaks me out.” Ever the researcher, I asked her what it was about Spanish class that made her so nervous. She told me it was having to speak in class – being called on or doing an oral report.

This reaction to forced speech agrees with reports from the research: Price (1991) interviewed a group of ten foreign language students in US who considered themselves to be anxious about foreign language study. When asked what bothered them the most about foreign language classes, students said that their greatest source of anxiety was having to speak the foreign language in class.” Loughrin-Sacco (1992) reported that for every student in a beginning French class, “speaking was the highest anxiety-provoking activity. Four of the five activities (out of 21) rated as the most anxiety-provoking by Young’s subjects (Young, 1990) entailed speaking.

I posted the anecdote about our neighbor and her reaction to Spanish class on facebook on August 11, 2018, under “Story Listening and Reading for Language Acquisition.” The reactions added valuable depth.

The posts all confirmed that forced output produces high anxiety in students in foreign language classes.

Some of these reports described experiences that took place about the time the above research was published.

Judith Dubois: When I was teaching English Composition in the university in Agen (France), I had classes of mostly girls who wanted to become English teachers. One day ... I asked them to write about a frightening experience. I was surprised that almost a quarter of the class wrote about being called on to speak in class as the most frightening thing that had ever happened to them.

Kathrin Shechtman: Forced output is terrible. It makes students feel dumb, especially since they will be corrected. School almost ruined English for me, and it made me hate French. It made me feel stupid. I don’t want to do this to my students.

Others confirmed that the problem is still with us, in today’s classrooms:

Kyung Sook Cho: “I see that the majority of students in my (university) class (in Korea) have developed a great deal of anxiety over English class. Everybody has it. They feel relieved when they share their feelings about this, and realize that they are not the only ones.”

Jen Schongalla noted that some administrators and scholars believe in and insist on forced output. “I would love to read these (facebook) posts to my administrators and to other random ‘experts’ who still say things like ‘make them talk’ or ‘get them speaking’ etc.” Schongalla adds “I have a hard time communicating this concept despite explaining theory, pointing to diagrams, etc. The problem of forced output is the one thing everyone seems to willfully ignore,” which leads to the question of whether people disagree with the research, and/or have never experienced the discomfort of forced output.

Beniko Mason made an important distinction between private personal conversation and public displays of competence: “When my students come up to me after a Story Listening lesson and want to talk with me in English about the story, that is wonderful. Sometimes they write me a note or a message telling me what they personally think about the story. I do not have my students talk in my class, as my students are still beginners (TOEIC 250 to 600). They are shy about speaking in English. They understand a lot, but they are still shy about talking.” Note that traditional methods demand public displays of speaking immediately.

DOES SPEAKING CONTRIBUTE TO LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AND/OR SPEAKING FLUENCY?

Correlational studies show no clear advantage to encouraging speaking

A small number of studies show positive correlations between second language proficiency and student oral output in classes as well as outside of school (reviewed in Chaudren, 1988). As Chaudren points out, however, since these studies are correlational, this relationship could be the result of increased competence, not its cause. Other studies show no relationship between amount of output and competence. Ely (1986) reported that voluntary class participation in a university Spanish class correlated with performance on a test of oral fluency ($r = .40$) for first quarter students but not for second quarter students ($r = -.02$) and correlations between voluntary participation and performance on measures of oral and written correctness were small and insignificant. Ross (1992), in a study of adult EFL in Japan, found no relationship between the amount of pair work practice and fluency.

Delaying speech production

Gary (1975) provides evidence showing that delaying speech production has no negative effect in classroom instruction: She examined children studying Spanish as a foreign language over a period of five months. Her experimental group did not speak at all for the first 14 weeks but, instead, had to produce "active responses" that demonstrated comprehension. Also, they were not forced to speak for much of the next seven weeks. The experimental group was shown to be superior to the control group in listening comprehension and equal in speaking, despite the fact that the controls had more "practice" in speaking.

How to promote speaking fluency

Theory says that competence is clearly related to input, not to output. It predicts that speaking ability (fluency and accuracy) is the result of obtaining comprehensible input. Sari (2011) provides evidence for this, showing the effect of written input (reading) on

speaking. Sari compared two classes of intensive English of high-school students in Turkey. Neither class placed an emphasis on speech production, but the class that did more self-selected reading and listening (and less grammar study and less writing) did significantly better on a test of speaking (picture description).

The enduring demand for premature speaking appears to be correlated with a reluctance to embrace or even consider an obvious and highly effective source of comprehensible input: pleasure reading (Cho and Krashen, in press).

Informal environments: acquisition proceeds quite well when speech is not forced.

Successful language in the informal environment, outside of class, often includes a silent period, or period of very reduced production. Acquirers are not forced to speak and may remain silent for month or years, but there is evidence that they do well in language acquisition, consistent with the view that production of language does not require output. Typical reports have been provided by Hakuta (1974) and Ervin-Tripp, (1974),

Here are some less typical reports.

The indigenous people living in the Vaupes River area in Columbia and Brazil, when they were studied by Sorenson in the 1960's, spoke about 24 languages, tremendous diversity for a group of only 10,000 people. Multilingualism is stimulated by an unusual custom: People are required to marry someone who does not speak the same language! Sorenson points out that although some of the languages spoken in this area were mutually intelligible, requiring only a few days listening to understand, others are not, even some of those that are closely genetically related (Sorenson, 1967. p. 674).

In this area, children grow up with the father's and mother's languages, but during adolescence, according to Sorenson, an individual "actively and almost suddenly" begins to speak the two or three other languages he or she has been exposed to. "In adulthood he may acquire more languages; as he approaches old age ... he will go on to perfect his knowledge of all the languages at his disposal" (p. 678).

Most interesting for this discussion is how these multilinguals go about the task of language acquisition. According to Sorenson, "The Indians do not practice speaking a language they do not know well yet. Instead, they passively learn lists of words, forms, phrases in it and familiarize themselves with the sound of its pronunciation... They may make an occasional attempt to speak a new language in an appropriate situation, but if it does not come easily, they will not try to force it." (p. 679-80). Sorenson was told that "it takes from at least one to two years to learn a new language fluently" (p. 680). In other words, speech is not forced.

Nida (1957) tells us "I have personally inquired of a number of African polyglots just how they learned the language of neighboring tribes. Almost without exception, the story is the same: they went to live in a neighboring village, or on some plantation, or in the mines they were working with people who spoke another language. But instead of trying hard to learn the language, they seemed to just take it for granted that after listening to the language long enough, they would find that they could 'hear' it. 'We just live there and listen, and before we know it, we can hear what they say. Then we can talk,' one African explained. This does not mean that he expected to be able to understand (i.e. 'hear') everything in the language before he said anything, but his whole attitude was one a passive absorption, confident that his ears and brain would take in the language and that, without particular worry or concern on his part, he would be able to understand and to speak sooner than even he imagined. (see Krashen 2017, for a similar assumption made by polyglot Steve Kaufman).

There are obvious similarities between these cases and that of a young immigrant, Armando, who arrived in the US from Mexico in his teens. I interviewed Armando after he had been in the US working at an Israeli restaurant for 12 years (Krashen, 2016). Armando spoke English well, but spoke Hebrew as well or better. Armando told me that it was two or three years until he was comfortable in conversation even though he heard Hebrew all day on the job. He said that he never forced or pushed himself with Hebrew, that his approach was relaxed. This was made possible because of his friendly relationship with members of the family that owned the restaurant and customers. He had never studied Hebrew grammar, had no idea what the grammatical rules were, and only received correction on vocabulary. Armando could not read Hebrew.

With his permission, I recorded a short conversation in Hebrew between Armando and a member of the family who owned the restaurant and played it for four educated native speakers of Hebrew not associated with the restaurant. The evaluations were very positive: The range was from “very good” (not a native speaker but clearly fluent and comfortable in Hebrew) to “native.”

Clearly, language acquirers can reach high levels of competence without being forced to speak.

Allowing speech to emerge in classrooms.

Teachers attest that in foreign language classes in which comprehensible input is provided, speaking ability does not manifest itself immediately, but “emerges” gradually. There appears to be individual variation in the length of the silent period, but there is no evidence this has an impact on improvement in the second language.

Varvel (1979) describes a silent period in formal instruction (Silent Way methodology) that lasted for nine weeks, indicating that there may be a fair amount of individual variation in the duration of the silent period for adults in language classes: "There was a woman from Taiwan who after several weeks was still conspicuously silent in class. She never talked, and when called upon would only answer in a whisper, saying only what was required. It was clear, however, that she was one of the most attentive students in the class, had a clear understanding of what was being done, and seemingly enjoyed the class. She also had a positive attitude towards what and how she was learning. At no time was she coerced into active participation.

"Then one day in the ninth week of school she sat in the front row and actively participated throughout the whole hour. From that point on, she continued to participate actively in a more limited way and at times helped others and was helped by others..." (p. 491)

While there may have been other reasons for this student's silence, this example suggests that the silent period should be respected, and that some students develop speaking readiness later than others.

SOME CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis presented here supports the Pleasure Hypothesis (Krashen, 1994): Activities that are perceived to be unpleasant do not help language acquisition, and activities that promote language acquisition are perceived to be pleasant. (But the Pleasure Hypothesis does not claim that all activities that are pleasant are beneficial.) Specifically, forced output causes anxiety, and does not help language acquisition. Lao and Krashen (2008) confirmed this hypothesis, presenting data showing that activities that middle school students of Mandarin as a foreign language rate as more effective were also

considered to be more pleasant ($r = .78$). Consistent with language acquisition theory, effective and pleasant activities were those that supplied interesting and comprehensible input.

One practical implication is obvious: Don't require speaking. But we might also consider another policy change: Don't test speaking.

If we test speaking, the result will be to encourage more speaking: But as argued here, more speaking does not result in more language acquisition. Rather, according to the Comprehension Hypothesis, the ability to produce output is the result of getting comprehensible input. In addition, testing speaking is enormously time-consuming (and expensive) to administer and score.

DEFENDING OUTPUT

Domain for Error Correction

It can be claimed that output is valuable because it provides a domain for error correction: When we speak, we make mistakes, which others correct, which helps our acquisition, helping us arrive at a more accurate form of the rule. This is, of course, conscious learning, not language acquisition. But a number of studies show that correction produces only a fragile effect that lasts for only a short time (e.g., Truscott, 1999; see also Krashen, 1994a, for a review of studies showing that correction has little effect). Also correction is not frequent in classrooms or in the informal environment (Krashen, 1994a, pp. 60-61).

Domain for Comprehensible Output

The comprehensible output (CO) hypothesis states that we acquire language when we attempt to transmit a message but fail and have to try again. Eventually, we arrive at the correct form of our utterance, our conversational partner finally understands, and we acquire the new form we have produced. In Krashen (1998) I argue that:

1. Instances of comprehensible output, where the native speaker requested confirmation or clarification, are quite rare.
2. High levels of linguistic competence are possible without output.
3. There is no direct evidence that comprehensible output leads to language acquisition.

Speaking invites comprehensible input.

When we speak, somebody might answer (conversation), which could result in more comprehensible input. It has yet to be investigated how much comprehensible input we receive in conversation, and to what extent this input is helpful. Most important, as noted above, acquisition can take place without interaction, from reading and listening alone.

A FINAL ANECDOTE

Sometimes, as part of my public presentations, I include some sample lessons in a language that is (usually) unfamiliar to the audience. Before I start, I ask the audience if it is ok with them if I give them the lessons, and at the same time I come out from behind the speaker's podium and walk a few paces into the area where the audience is sitting. The reaction is the same, and has been the same since I starting the demonstration about 30 years ago: Complete silence, and no movement. No looks of anticipation, no nodding of heads. I then comment, "What enthusiasm." Then I ask: "What goes through your mind when you are listening to some 'expert' give a talk, and suddenly he announces that he will

give you a language lesson, comes out from behind the podium and comes right over to where you are sitting? And then they tell me: “Fear” or “panic,” or “you are going to call on me.”

I point out that they are professional educators, and yet the idea of a language lesson in public makes them nervous. I ask them “What does this mean?” And then I answer for them: It means that we are doing something profoundly wrong and unnatural in language teaching. I tell them that anxiety in this situation is not their fault. I would feel the same way. Then I announce that I will give them the lessons anyway, but I that I will return to the front of the room. There are obvious signs of relief.

NOTES

1. I assume in this paper some familiarity with the Comprehension Hypothesis and other aspects of language acquisition theory (e.g. Krashen, 1981, 1982, 2003; Krashen, Lee, and Lao, 2017.)

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