

# Controlling the Velocity: A Sequitur

by T. Edward Harvey

*Ed. Note: This article is a sequel to T. Edward Harvey's original article "Controlling the Velocity: A Sine Qua Non in Teaching Listening" (TESL Reporter 13, 2:30) and was stimulated by J. Donald Bowen's response (TESL Reporter 13, 4:71) to that article.*

The question of language variation in its myriad of forms and levels is one that we as practitioners especially must not overlook. It's handy for me to separate language variation into categories. The first is linguistic. Within the linguistic domain, I contrast segmental characteristics with suprasegmental happenings and conditions such as rhythm, pitch, and velocity. The second category is defined by the socio-linguistic construct "register." Segmental and suprasegmental characteristics of speech will change according to the different sociological factors present in the environment where the speech is uttered. For example, Charles de Gaulle spoke at 75 words per minute (WPM) as he delivered his farewell address to the French people. But, he was clocked at speeds upwards of 200 WPM when trying to put a point across in a cabinet meeting.

Above the realm of the language characteristics lie the psychological factors which affect the L2 learner. In other words, another *sine qua non* for the L2 teacher is to realize that there are more things operating in the learning environment than just the L2 sounds themselves.

Importantly, Dr. Bowen brings out the points that: (1) speech varies according to the situation in which it is uttered; (2) it is psychologically satisfying to adult learners to be made aware of overt rules—their language acquisition usually improves if they know enough about the language to absorb the new rule—and (3) students will probably speak more accurately if they are made aware of how segmental and suprasegmental factors produce language variation.

The point that hopefully came out in this author's first article about rate-alteration is that L2 learning is affected by psychological factors which we can try to control. In the case of commercial lab tapes, we ask our students to do more than we do as native listeners in conversation. We ask them to listen without adequate processing time or enough pauses, etc., to comprehend the message fluently. Hence, a comment on the role of stress and anxiety in acquiring listening fluency in an L2 is again in order.

Anxiety, often brought on by task overload, can be a major deterrent to the learning of listening comprehension. This is particularly true for a person who is what psychologists call "field dependent." In our role as teachers, we must eliminate as much stress as possible from the learning environment. Greer (1972) has pointed out that when a student is task overloaded, errors increase and there is a tendency to revert to previously learned generalizations—in this case the learner's native language—rather than make specific identifications of the L2 sounds in question.

Technologists have made it possible for us to mechanically vary the language velocity so that we can, in part, eliminate the negative psychological effects of velocity on comprehension. The speech compressor-expander is offered as a tool to eliminate stress in the learning environment and enhance the students' chances of attaining native listening fluency.

## REFERENCE

- Greer, George D. Jr. et. al. 1972. An examination of four major factors impacting on psychomotor performance effectiveness (Section D: Task loading: a way of viewing systems operator performance). In *The psychomotor domain*. Washington, D.C.: Gryphon House.