Silence is Golden: When Language Minority Students Don't Speak

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The silent period, the period between when a second language learner first encounters a language and his/her first utterances, is often misinterpreted as an unnatural phenomenon which stands as an obstacle to language acquisition. As a result, many educators look for techniques to help students overcome this "affliction," not realizing that the silent period, in fact, is a natural part of the language acquisition process. Research has shown that a lag time exists between when learners begin understanding messages in a new language and when they are able to produce it (Asher, 1981; Winitz, 1981; Krashen, 1985). During this time, learners take in language until they feel confident enough to speak. Due to many factors that vary with each individual learner and the learning environment, the silent period may last from a couple of weeks to several months (Ervin-Tripp, 1974; Hakuta, 1974; Gibbons, 1985; Shannon, 1987). Demands for early speech production are not only futile, but will cause students to put up emotional barriers ("affective filters"), thereby truly slowing their language acquisition (Dulay, Burt, & Krashen, 1982). Educators who understand how the silent period fits into the language acquisition process may be better equipped to help language minority (LM) students learn the second language more effectively and painlessly.

The notion of the silent period is in part based on evidence that production is not necessary for language acquisition. Comprehension-based methods that do not force production and allow it to follow the development of receptive skills have been found to be highly effective. Winitz (1981) tested the effects of several types of instruction on language acquisition and found that the "comprehension without oral production" method produced similar results as methods that required oral production. Asher's (1981) research on a low stress, meaning-based method called Total Physical Response suggests that comprehension based approaches are actually <u>more</u> effective than other methods in terms of rapidity of acquisition and retention.

Below are my own experiences with the silent period as a second language learner of English and as a language teacher. My purpose is to illustrate the effects of forced production on students and the silent period's place in the language acquisition process. Overcoming the belief that successful language learners produce early may be difficult for some, as my experiences demonstrate. However, realizing the contrary has changed my self-concept and my understanding of the factors that contribute to successful language acquisition.

Experiences as an ESL Student

My family moved to the United States the summer before I entered the third grade and I was placed in an English submersion classroom at the local public elementary school. I remember the first two months quite vividly because my attempts to produce the language were accompanied by anxiety and frustration. My teacher was a firm believer in the importance of early speech production for language acquisition, and from the first day of school, called on me in class at every opportunity. She would stand very close to my desk (perhaps believing, as some do, that volume and proximity changes incomprehensible messages to comprehensible ones), and she would enunciate the question or problem slowly and loudly, and then wait for my response. Although it was clear that I did not understand her, I think she believed that her questions would somehow stimulate the right answer to miraculously roll out of my mouth. I came to believe this too, and each time it didn't, it reinforced the growing notion in my own mind that there was something wrong with me. Lengthy periods of silence were typical after one of these questions and sometimes I would utter an awkward answer, but more often than not, the silence would stretch until she grew impatient and called on another student. This would be replayed almost daily and the more she persisted, the more I withdrew, and in fact, I soon discovered that if I remained silent long enough, she would move on. This strategy worked fairly well until I was placed in a reading group and had to take my turn reading aloud regularly. Stumbling over each word only reinforced the idea that I was incapable of doing what everyone else could do with ease. Students in the other reading groups would stop to listen, snicker, and laugh as I awkwardly formed the meaningless words. These experiences in the classroom had a predictable effect: I became very self-conscious and withdrew from the other students. It was a long time before I realized how strongly I linked my self-worth to the ability to speak English.

Teaching Experience

By the time I began to work as a language teacher I had come to subscribe to the same language learning philosophy as my early teachers, and as a result, put my students through some of the same types of experiences. For several years I taught Chinese to Chinese-American and Chinese immigrant children living in my community in a private weekend school. Although developing Chinese language proficiency was one of the goals, the more subtle and pragmatic purpose for the school was to provide a forum for interaction among the children: to ease the acculturation process for recently arrived immigrants and to expose Chinese-American children to the Chinese language and culture. Typical of most community language schools, resources were extremely limited and language classes included students of many ages and language abilities. In my last year at the school, my elementary Cantonese class of about 10 students included children ages 5

through 10 of mostly monolingual English speakers and one monolingual Chinese speaker. Instruction was 85% in English and 15% in Cantonese for two hours each Saturday and Sunday.

I became concerned about Paul, the monolingual Chinese speaker, when it became clear that he could not or would not participate orally in class. Paul, 5 at the time, had arrived in the United States only a month before enrolling at the school, and according to his mother, had had almost no contact with any other children since their arrival. Although I knew he spoke Cantonese fluently and appeared to understand classroom instruction in Cantonese, he would not respond orally. (He would communicate in other ways, however, such as nodding or shaking his head in response to questions.) Paul's mother was very anxious for him to acquire English, and although my job was to teach Chinese, she asked if I could find ways to encourage him to learn English while helping him maintain his Chinese.

During class I would try to "help" him produce English words by requiring him to repeat the correct responses to my questions, although I was fairly certain that he did not ascribe any meaning to his words. I would have demanded Paul produce more and more in English had I sufficient time and opportunity. Fortunately for him, the diverse needs of the students did not allow for it, and instead, I encouraged him to interact with the other students during free time. David, a 6-year-old monolingual English student, befriended Paul, and I observed their games of mock fighting and tag and had assumed that they got on well together despite the language gap because they did not need to communicate orally in their games. I soon discovered, however, that David would speak to Paul in English to explain in elaborate detail the rules of the various games and to tell Paul about the events of his week, including exciting cartoons, movies or videos he had seen. Initially, Paul would listen intently without saying a word. About three weeks after I observed their first games together, Paul began to repeat many of the things David said during their games, for example, "I'm gonna get you!" and "I win! I win!" He would repeat them over and over under his breath almost unconsciously, long after the games were over and while he was engaged in classroom activities. It was about two to three months later when Paul initiated his own English speech, and although riddled with grammatical "errors," he was communicating effectively with David and began to interact with the other students in and out of the classroom. By this time, I had become less concerned about Paul because he had begun to participate in class in Cantonese, and I was encouraged by his friendship with David.

Discussion and Implications

Early language acquisition experiences in the American classroom had convinced me that language learning was a painful and arduous process and I, in turn, had imposed this philosophy upon my students. When my perception of the silent period changed and I

viewed it as part of the natural language acquisition process, however, I began to understand that words produced in the second language "are not the beginning of second-language acquisition; rather, they are the result of the comprehensible input . . ." and will come naturally when the student is ready (Krashen, 1985, p. 9). This early phase of silence is followed closely by the ability to utter routine phrases, and real language emerges only a few weeks or months later (Krashen, 1985; Saville-Troike, 1987).

The role of the teacher then is to provide input and to help lower students' affective filters by creating meaning-rich, supportive, and relaxed atmospheres. Students will then be free of affective barriers to decide when to begin speaking the new language. This will considerably reduce students' learning anxiety and allow them to concentrate on meaningful messages in their new language (Krashen & Terrell, 1983). In this way, students are able to develop language competence with the least amount of stress.

Both Asher (1986) and Krashen & Terrell (1983) have developed methods that take full advantage of students' silent periods by providing substantial amounts of language input in low stress environments. Asher's Total Physical Response (TPR) approach, mentioned earlier, is intended primarily for beginners and low-intermediates and asks students to perform physical acts along with the instructor as the instructor calls aloud commands. Only when students are confident of their ability to perform the acts independently are they asked to do so and they are not required to repeat or produce commands orally. When students are able to respond easily to those commands, a clear indication of their comprehension and acquisition, the instructor introduces new and more complex ones. TPR allows students to take in large amounts of input and produce only when they are ready.

The Natural Approach (1983), introduced by Krashen and Terrell, incorporates TPR in early stages of instruction and provides other ways to give input and to detect students' comprehension. Suggestions include having the instructor give descriptions and tell simple stories with illustrations in order to increase comprehension. The use of manipulatives—objects used for illustration such as dolls and puppets, cuisenaire rods, and everyday objects found around the classroom or home—are particularly useful for creating comprehensible messages and focusing attention away from self-conscious students. Manipulatives can also be used for alternative methods of checking comprehension, allowing students to respond without speaking, for example, by pointing at a picture or holding up an object that corresponds to the answer.

Although students in the silent period are not prepared to talk, they are often willing and even anxious to express themselves in other ways. Helping students find alternative methods to participate will promote their sense of belonging in the class and provide them a chance for expression. One method is to ask students to represent a

description, story, or personal experience in pictures or another visual form and for the teacher or a more advanced peer to create a narrative in conjunction with the student. Students who are willing can be encouraged to volunteer to show or "perform" their creations with the teacher or peer acting as narrator. The input of the teacher or peer's narrative would be particularly meaningful to the student since the topic is the student's own creation.

The principle in all of these approaches is the same: maximize input, minimize output. Using these approaches and other input-based methods will help reduce student anxieties and promote more effective language acquisition in the classroom.

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