

The Silent Period What to do with Language Learners Who are Seen and not Heard

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Henry Daniels and David Wood

The various accounts of naturally occurring and synthetic silent periods and the Swahili and Turkish monologues reported by Stevick led us to think again about learners' first encounters with foreign languages. At the Université de Lyon II we decided to run a half-day workshop for language teachers to consider what a synthetic silent period (roughly, an initial period of foreign language learning during which learners are not called upon to speak more than an absolute minimum) might feasibly consist of. What follows is an account of what happened during that workshop, plus our comments concerning the role and nature of such a synthetic silent period. We also draw some tentative conclusions concerning the basic issues underlying the mysterious processes of understanding.

The aim of the workshop was not to test out any kind of hypotheses about the generality, desirability or efficiency of a silent period among second language learners. The literature would appear to suggest quite conclusively that silent periods are both useful and desirable. We set out with the objective of introducing a group of beginners to a foreign language without requiring them to vocalize more than a minimum in order to come to some conclusions about the activities and conditions which seem best suited to such an introductory period.

The Workshop

The participants were divided into a German beginner's group and an Italian one. The conditions imposed on the groups were slightly different: throughout many of the exercises in the German group (henceforth "the Germans") participants were explicitly requested not to speak, nor were they allowed at any point to use their native language. "The Italians", as we shall call the other group, worked in what might be described as a more Mediterranean atmosphere in which they were

allowed to speak what language they liked, when they liked. The teachers spoke only the target language. Here is a selection of the exercises that we did during a two-hour silent period.

- 1) **Introductions:** The teacher asked the members of the group their names (which was the only personal information they were called upon to give). He followed this with a ten-minute chat about himself, his origins, his family, his job and his connections with the country whose language he spoke. He illustrated his monologue with photographs, maps and objects as appropriate.
- 2) **A moving experience:** Learners sat in an inward-facing closed circle, leaving the teacher outside. He read out a number of statements concerning the people and objects present in the room (for example, "Three people in the room are wearing glasses"). If the statement was true, the learners said "Si" (or "Ja"), and moved one place to the right. If it was false they said "No" (or "Nein") and moved one place to the left. Ambiguities in some of the statements coupled with occasional errors of comprehension caused much bumping into one another and hilarity. At the end of the exercise learners were given a photocopy of the statements, which they could study and discuss in whatever way they wanted. It was interesting to note that most learners' first reaction was to read through all the statements quietly before making any comment.
- 3) **Bathing (video):** The Germans watched and listened to a ten-minute documentary film about Dusseldorf. No note-taking took place, nor were learners asked to share their impressions. The aim was simply for learners to bathe in the foreign language in the absence of any kind of task or test of their understanding.
- 4) **More or less:** The teacher told the learners that he was going to leave the room and that, while he was out, they should think of a number between one and a hundred and try to agree on what it must be in the foreign language. When they were ready they called the teacher back in and he tried to guess what the number was. Learners were requested

to say the target language equivalent of "more" or "less" according to whether his guesses were too low or too high. The procedure was repeated three times during a two-hour silent period.

- 5) *A lecturette*: The teacher gave a ten-minute talk about long-distance walking. His stated aim was to explain to the learners how to organize a walk: what to wear, what to take and how to carry it. He gave a few tips, for example, on how to make an overnight shelter, how to use a compass, and what to do if lost. He illustrated his talk with a number of objects: a compass, a map, a guide book and some sticking plaster; and he did a number of drawings on the board when explaining certain points. Long distance walking being the teacher's favorite hobby, he had no shortage of things to say and had an answer for everything.
- 6) *General knowledge quiz*: The teacher asked twenty easy general knowledge questions, each of which he repeated once. The Germans wrote down their answers, "Ja" or "Nein". The questions were then read out for a third time and learners called out their answers. Finally a photocopied list of the questions was given to each learner who was free to study it. It was apparent that learners felt the need at this point to exchange some comments in their native language.
- 7) *A guitar lesson*: The teacher gave a three minute lecturette about the construction of the guitar, following which he gave a short beginners' lesson to the group during which three learners actually played some notes on the guitar.
- 8) *Hunt the thimble*: The teacher left the room and asked the learners to hide a small object while he was out. Having been called back in again, he sat down and tried to guess where the object was. The Germans monitored his guesses by saying "Kalt" or "Warm" according to how accurate they were.

Learner reactions

Following the exercises, the Germans and Italians came together, compared their experience and commented, having seen a silent period "from the inside". Generalizations on some of the comments that came from the discussion are:

- Learners don't seem to feel threatened by the foreign language provided they have at least the opportunity to speak to each other and to the teacher in their native language.
- "Bathing" may be of limited value: the documentary film about Dusseldorf was not felt to be particularly useful in this instance.
- Learners apparently don't suffer from any serious feelings of frustration at not being able to speak the foreign language.
- "Silly" questions in the general knowledge quiz are perhaps better avoided.
- To their surprise, most learners have a very pleasant sensation of actually understanding a great deal of what is said.
- As a result of having understood, most of these particular learners found this a motivating though tiring way to begin learning a foreign language.
- The numbers game worried some Germans. This may have been due to the unexpected arrangement of tens and units in that language, but it may be that numbers connote previous scholastic failures to some learners.

Conclusions from this workshop

What follows is a list of the main criteria that guided us in choosing the exercises. Where appropriate, we have mentioned thoughts we had during or after the workshop in the light of learners' reactions.

It will be noticed that the exercises we used fall into two main categories: those which involve one-way communication, such as the lecturette, and those which involve restricted two-way communication. We would like to point out that the only instance of "pure" one-way communication we used was the documentary film where the addressees had no means of modifying the speakers' behavior. Most face-to-face interaction involves by its very nature some proportion of restricted two-way communication as in the case of "Hunt the thimble". It would appear that a cocktail containing both types is most appropriate. For the second type of exercise, it is of course necessary to pre-teach the few required words.

Many exercises concerned the "here and now". This meant that in exercises such as "A moving experience" and the guitar lesson, language was an accessory to learners' understanding of the situation (in particular, themselves, each other, the

teacher and the extra-linguistic environment). Those exercises which involved the evocation of abstract and/or remote referents as did "Introductions" and the general knowledge quiz, relied heavily on international vocabulary, proper names, pictures, maps and non-verbal communication.

In many exercises the teacher had near total control of what was going on. However, in exercises such as "More or less" and " Hunt the thimble", the learners had joint responsibility for the turn of events. They thus had the combined pleasure of working together and of being able to tell the teacher he was wrong.

The teacher's discourse was at all times directed towards the learner. This meant that the latter were functioning as addressees and not simply as learners. The vast majority of so-called listening activities are, in our view, limited if not to say misleading in their scope: coming, as they do, from tape recorders where speakers are engaged in some sort of dialogue (which is, according to current orthodoxy, the less scripted it is, the better) these listening activities practise the peculiar skill of eavesdropping.

We were careful, during the execution of the exercises, neither to over-gesticulate nor to speak too slowly nor to repeat ourselves unnecessarily. We aimed at all times to make normal use of language and to treat the learners as intelligent adults whom we expected *a priori* to understand us, and not as miserable beginners who need to be protected from the horrors of subjunctives or irregular plurals until they achieve linguistic maturity. We do not go along with the view expressed by Gary and Gary that:

[what] is needed are materials which start at the very beginnings of language learning with carefully prepared listening objectives and tasks and move through a variety of increasingly more difficult and complex language forms and meanings..."

It seems to us that learners are least likely to be anxious and therefore most able to learn when the object of their attention is not language but a pleasantly disposed interlocutor who has interesting, amusing or useful things to tell them in a way which is at most unfamiliar but far from opaque, all things considered.

We all enjoy doing what we are good at. Some people are quiet in their own language, particularly in groups. First encounters with foreign languages for some of these people can be very heavy going if not to say positively frightening. Understanding, however, takes place in the intimacy of our own heads; we may not

all be great talkers, but, given the high proportion of time we spend reading, viewing and listening in our everyday lives, it is not unreasonable to suppose that most of us are fairly proficient understanders. Even if we aren't, we probably think we are, and that is what matters here. If, in our first prolonged encounter with a foreign language we can get away with doing what we are best at; while any errors we make go unnoticed by others, we stand every chance of reacting positively and confidently to this new situation. Gary and Gary say approximately the same thing:

Learning through a comprehension approach is far less ego-taxing for many people than having to produce publicly, either in writing or in speech, what will initially be highly deviant language forms. In comprehension approach the learners can make their mistakes privately and privately make the corrections.

The largely uncharted tracts of classroom silent period that lie beyond the first two or three hours lie in wait of eager explorers. It may be that the whole thing turns out to be a fruitless search for a northwest passage and that protracted silent periods are found to be unmanageable and not worth the bother. We hope that not too many teachers will find themselves washed up on the shores of Baffin Island and that they will return to recount their adventures in far-off lands undreamt of by language teaching man.

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