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PLAYING IT BY EAR: THINGS THAT HAPPEN INSIDE A SILENT PERIOD

HENRY DANIELS, PATRICIA PRINGLE and DAVID WOOD

Universite Lyon 2, France

The findings of recent and not so recent research on second language acquisition and learning tend to suggest the desirability of introducing foreign languages to beginners via a silent period, during which, time and effort are devoted almost exclusively to aural comprehension.

Our aim being principally that of examining how a classroom silent period operates, we found 60 hours to be a satisfactory length in the case of this group of French adult learners of English. We present and discuss here the organization of one particular comprehension-oriented course, the way other skills were integrated, learners' and teachers' reactions to the experience, and a number of techniques used.

The empirical evidence and arguments in support of an initial 'silent' or 'pre-speaking' period during which elementary learners of foreign languages are not called upon to speak, are arousing the interest of growing numbers of researchers and language teachers. In the literature, the following general points are made:

- (1) A tendency towards better all-round performance has been noted in learners who have experienced a silent period than in those who have not (Asher *et al.*, 1974; Postovsky, 1974; Thiele and Scheibner-Herzig, 1983).
- (2) Learners who are required at too early a stage to speak are likely to suffer from a phenomenon known as 'task overload' which probably inhibits language acquisition and the exercise and development of discriminatory skills, creates anxiety and encourages interference from L1 (Ingram *et al.*, 1975; Nord, 1975; Krakowian, 1981). Understanding or misunderstanding, goes on in the intimacy of our own heads. If not called upon to perform, learners can come to grips with the new foreign language, under cover, without having to expose their sometimes vulnerable 'language ego' to the censure of teachers or peers (Gary and Gary, 1981; Marton, 1983; Daniels and Wood, 1984).
- (3) In natural circumstances both child and adult acquirers of foreign languages typically go through a 'silent period' (Hakuta, 1974; Huang and Hatch, 1978; Dulay *et al.*, 1982, pp. 22-24).
- (4) The audio-lingual approach has laid great emphasis on the importance of speaking as a foreign language learning goal, to the extent that many language learners are able to

'vocalize' (which presumably does not have the same status or manifest the same complexity or creativeness as 'speaking'¹ while remaining, in the words of Belasco (1971) cited in Nord (1980), "virtually incompetent in understanding the spoken language". Understanding competence is very possibly of more use to most learners of foreign languages than is speaking competence. It would therefore seem logical, given the impossibility of doing everything at once, to give priority to training in listening comprehension (Nord, 1974; Davies, 1980).

(5) It is very motivating and even exciting for beginners to find that, despite what they feared, they can understand a great deal of what a well-disposed foreigner wants them to understand, so long as they focus on such things as similarities between L1 and L2 where they exist, kinesics, proxemics and the extralinguistic environment, and do not attempt to extract all their data merely from sound waves (Asher, *et al.*, 1974; Stevick, 1980, pp. 245, 247; Daniels and Wood, 1984).

(6) We might add that learners who are the receivers of constant comprehensible native speaker discourse have a better quality diet rather than those who, in accordance with audio-lingual orthodoxy, are exposed to sustained stretches of their own efforts in the foreign language and those of their peers.

Our aim in this paper is not to put any of these ideas to the test, but rather to: (1) describe a loosely controlled silent period experiment² conducted May–July 1984 at the Université Lyon 2; (2) encourage other members of the language teaching profession, particularly in Europe, to experiment in the light of what we have learned from our experience about: the possible dimensions of a silent period, the kind of activities which lend themselves best to this approach, the integration of other skills, what it feels like to be a learner and a teacher during a silent period.

THE EXPERIMENT

Having informed prospective course members that they would be taking part in an experiment the outcome of which depended to a large extent on their own spirit of adventure, we ran the course for 14 learners of English of whom six were complete beginners, eight were false beginners who had been tested and found unsuitable for anything beyond a beginner's course, four were men, ten were women. The oldest group member was forty-five years old and the youngest twenty-three. The average age of the group was thirty-four. Five of the group members were unemployed, the others worked. The group consisted of four secretaries, two research workers, one medical student, one civil engineer and one teacher of mentally-handicapped children. The native language of twelve of the learners was French and of two was Arabic. Two had some knowledge of the Italian and two had some knowledge of German. No group member had any previous experience of silent period techniques. The course consisted of twenty-seven 4-hour lessons at the rate of 12 hours (three lessons) per week (total contact hours: 108, in 9 consecutive weeks). The bulk of the teaching was done by three native speakers of British English.

Though we decided somewhat arbitrarily to aim at a 72 hour silent period, we did not know at the outset what its actual length would be or how the integration of speaking would come about, intending that such decisions would be taken largely by the learners themselves.

We were fortunate enough to have a very co-operative group who took an interest not only in their individual progress but in that of the group as a whole and in the development of the experiment. The learners were frequently invited to comment on their reactions during the silent period. Most learners reported subjective feelings of progress in their capacity to understand speakers of English. The fact of not having any overt measure of progress such as speaking did not seem to worry any of the learners.

One remarked: "I would like very much to speak, but I'm afraid to: you will have to make us speak".

The general feeling after 44 hours was that the silent period should be prolonged and that the onset of speaking, when it came, should be gradual.

When invited to talk about their strategies of understanding, four learners said they were consciously aware of trying to segment most of what they heard. Interestingly enough the majority reported having done this during the first 20 hours or so, and thereafter abandoning it in favour of more relaxed "top to bottom" form of processing³.

INTEGRATION OF OTHER SKILLS

Reading

We introduced reading early in the course, as an aid to aural understanding. No formal training was given in reading, but the learners were sometimes given transcripts of texts that had previously been read to them, and were encouraged to comment on anything they found interesting, unusual or in some way familiar. This activity, reminiscent of Community Language Learning technique proved to be enjoyable and stimulating for the learners.

Speaking

During the silent period, learners were of course free to speak what language they liked. We found that they were most of the time happy to limit their output in English to the minimal utterances required by certain exercises. We had the feeling that we were up against a problem of inertia and decided in view of their earlier request for a gradual onset of speaking, after 60 contact hours to help our learners take the plunge by asking them first of all to say all the words in a text they had before them which they thought were adjectives. (Similar identification had been carried out on previous occasions simply by underlining.) The learners were then asked what sort of things would typically be described by the adjectives they had found. During these first short vocalizing activities, though no one was specifically called upon to speak, everyone did. The teacher made no attempt to correct unless requested to do so. Two lessons later, following a similar sort of brain-storming activity about what could be bought at different shops, and a little roleplay in which "I'd like" and "some" and "a(n)" figured, came what we think was the first spontaneous and correctly formed creation in English when our Algerian learner, with characteristic charm said, "I'd like a break"⁴.

Another early speaking activity consisted of the teacher reading out a French text with a heavy English accent and asking learners to pinpoint some of his typical mistakes. This was done with great brio as was their imitation of the English accent while reading out the same text. It was then pointed out to the class that in order to be able to speak French with an English accent as convincing as the one they were using, they were clearly in command of a large part of the English phonological system. They were amused and interested to think that to speak English well they had to play at being English people just as they were doing while speaking French with an English accent.

We did not at any time involve learners in anything resembling pattern practice so that neither they nor we ever experienced that impression of accuracy and fluency that comes from hearing fairly continuous output in a tightly controlled situation. The only measure of their speaking competence these learners had were the fairly ungrammatical and syntactically limited strings they produced while trying to communicate freely. Though this may seem rather disappointing we feel that it is at least realistic; in our experience, even on courses where the emphasis has been on speaking from the word go, when invited to converse freely, beginners' output is often surprisingly marked by an inability or a refusal to use the things they have been practising so well and so thoroughly.

During the latter part of the course, topic areas covered in the silent period were re-introduced so that learners had the opportunity to talk about the same things they had heard their teachers talking about several weeks previously. We found that learners had chiefly remembered nouns, and tended, in the early stages of speaking, to limit their utterances to one or two words in length.

Writing

Writing played a very small part in this course. We gave these learners no training in writing and what they did write was largely limited to copying things down from the blackboard.

As an aid to the conscious study of syntax via practice in composition, the class was one day divided into groups and given an assortment of nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions and pronouns, each word written on a separate card. Each group was then free to work as it wished composing sentences of varying length and complexity. All the groups made extensive use of the blank cards on which they wrote words of their choice.

Right up until the end of the course the main emphasis was on aural comprehension. After the end of the silent period, speaking gradually took the place of reading as the next most important activity. Writing played a very minor role.

In the final discussion with the class which marked the end of the course, the following general points were made.

(1) A silent period of around 60 hours, followed by a gradual onset of speaking was found in this case to be satisfactory⁵.

(2) When asked to describe the current state of their individual competence, learners commented as follows (we have translated their comments from the French):

Aural comprehension

good

very good

good, given the length of the course

quite good

mediocre, but I no longer panic when I can't understand every word in the sentence.

Reading

good

globally good but lacking in precision

better than aural comprehension

difficult: I don't find having the text helps me much.

Writing

mediocre

very limited: I lack grammatical structure

weak.

Speaking

mediocre

quite good

I tend to talk like a child, using words rather than sentences. I am troubled by my inability to compose correct sentences

I lack confidence

I need another ("speaking") course to follow this one.

Control of grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary

more or less non-existent

grammar weak, but quite good in vocabulary and pronunciation

I am astonished by the amount of vocabulary I have managed to learn. How long will it last?

My ideas about grammar are very general. As regards pronunciation, I can hear perfectly well, but I have trouble reproducing the sounds.

(3) The silent approach was seen as generally positive, enjoyable, even surprising and mysterious.

(4) Most learners found 108 hours (the overall length of the course) too short, particularly in view of the recent onset of speaking.

Our own feelings were:

This group's application to and skill at aural comprehension was undoubtedly impressive.

They compared very favourably with higher level groups of our acquaintance.

We had a subjective impression that pronunciation was better than average, particularly among the true beginners in the group.

Certain learners' impression of vagueness and insecurity was somewhat worrying. The feeling of having completed a tightly-structured course, whatever its result, may be psychologically important for beginners, who seem to need tangible proof of their progress⁶.

We too thought that everyone would have benefitted from a further 20–30 hours of instruction. The post-silent period in this case was not long enough to allow the all-round better performance reported by Postovsky (1974) to develop.

INSIDE A SILENT PERIOD

During this silent period we made no use of recorded material, the language laboratory or video. We aimed instead to give our learners maximum opportunity to relate to native speakers in face-to-face interaction. We structured our 60 hours of teaching loosely around topics (holidays, food, work) but did not incorporate any form of progression, so that exercises we considered easier did not automatically come before those we considered to be difficult. We sought rather to vary the activities as much as possible according to the following criteria:

type of understanding required (content ~ form (morpho-syntax, segmental and supra-segmental phonology)).
 duration
 interest
 affective charge
 intellectual effort required
 degree of learner control
 contribution to group cohesion
 movement
 immediacy of feedback
 degree of overt teaching
 relevance to the here and now.

What follows is the brief description of eight of the many different activities we used plus a few comments on each.

(1) *Window shopping*

Learners were given a list of ten different kinds of shops which were already known to them. The teacher then told of what he had seen that morning in a number of shopwindows he had looked in on the way to the class. Learners had to number the shops on their list according to the order in which they occurred in the teacher's account. They then compared notes and asked for repetitions as necessary.

This essentially vocabulary-oriented exercise aims to build up and reinforce semantic structures via hyponymy and collocation. At the same time there is some small contribution of cultural understanding (e.g. there is no real English equivalent to the French 'fromagerie' or 'charcuterie').

(2) *Crocodile*

Following a lesson on giving directions learners formed a long line. The teacher, at the rear, shouted directions to the leader who was changed regularly and who led the group all around the building.

As well as providing fun and plenty of movement, this exercise gives learners the feel of 'turning left in English'. Hopefully the next time they turn left along the same corridor, the English directions will come back to them.

(3) *A concert*

Inspired by suggestopaedia techniques⁷ the teacher told the class a specially prepared romantic story to a background of chamber music. Learners listened to the story either watching the teacher or with their eyes closed. When it was finished, after a short period of silence, they were invited to discuss in French what they had understood. They were then given the transcription of the story which they read through quietly and asked any questions they wanted to. By popular request, the teacher read the story again with the same musical accompaniment.

It is undoubtedly necessary for this type of activity that the teacher rehearse his concert very thoroughly so as to be completely at ease in front of the class. We chose to do the concert at the end of an afternoon session when everyone was quite relaxed. Learners found it a pleasant experience but did not report having learnt a great deal from it. Their comprehension after the first reading was only very general.

(4) *Pull the other one*

The teacher told of three past jobs, two genuine and one false. the learners' task was to decide which one was the false one.

This exercise encouraged learners to listen for content, to revise vocabulary and also to watch out for the kind of kinesic 'leakage' that lets most of us down when we try to tell lies. The activity was therefore good practice in relating to the whole person and not trying to extract all information necessary for comprehension from speech.

(5) *Talking about language*

A 20 minute lecture on "Negation in French and English" was given, using learners' examples as material. Some time later, a similar lecture was given on "Question formation in French and English". Following this, a series of sentences composed at random, some negative, some interrogative and some affirmative was read out to learners who had to mark /?/ /+ / or /- / as appropriate, opposite the number of the sentence.

A similar global approach, atypical of the way grammar is normally presented to beginners, was used for the past/present/future distinction. Learners did surprisingly well in the discrimination exercises which followed, and found this type of 'language study' activity intellectually stimulating. What good it did their ability to understand spoken messages is difficult to say.

(6) *Round and round the garden*

Learners were given a list of vegetables and flowers with corresponding numbers. Following

initial discussion, explanation and recognition practice, they had to complete a photocopied plan of the teacher's garden by putting the appropriate number in the appropriate place, while listening to the teacher describing her garden.

This exercise was designed chiefly to practise prepositions and adverbials of place and to revise vegetable (food) vocabulary. At the end of the course the class was invited to a picnic in the same garden where we organized a treasure hunt using approximately the same words and expressions used in the earlier exercise.

(7) *Biographies*⁸

Learners were given the portraits of six different famous people lettered A-F which they studied and commented on in French. The teacher then read out five short biographies (without mentioning the name of the person), which learners had to allot to five of the portraits.

This exercise gave practice in recognizing dates, pronouns (he, she, his, her), names, professions and places, family vocabulary and of course the past tenses. It was followed up by an exercise in which the class decided, in the teacher's absence, on a famous person whose identity the teacher had to guess by asking yes/no questions.

We used many variants of this second type of exercise. In our experience it gives great pleasure to elementary learners to be able to control the teacher in this way. The reversal of roles is fun, contributes greatly to group cohesion and encourages some very attentive listening. It is also a salutary experience for the teacher to be, for once, the only person in the room who doesn't understand!

(8) *The imagination game*

Each learner quietly selected a word from a known text. The first learner announced his word to the class, and to the teacher, who began telling a story which incorporated this word. As the learners supplied him with words, the teacher twisted the story round in order to be able to incorporate them. Afterwards, a quick comprehension test revealed, somewhat surprisingly, that learners had not only listened for words but had actually followed the gist of what turned out to be a most peculiar story.

In addition to the activities reported here our silent period also included regular phonological training in the form of minimal pairs, 'spot the nucleus' and 'up or down' (pitch movement on the nucleus) exercises. The alphabet was taught early on and regular spelling dictations were given as were spot dictations of telephone numbers, dates and prices. On the level of content listening, we read the class serials, told them jokes and anecdotes, talked about our childhood, our holidays, our dreams, our families, our homes, our hobbies, in short all the everyday things that human beings normally talk about. The learners were visited by a series of outside speakers who gave talks on such subjects as street life in London, restoring old furniture, Irish folk-music and Morris dancing⁹.

Our overall (and very subjective) view is that this course was successful in that we received no very negative feedback, there was little absenteeism and the one learner who left the course before the end did so for professional reasons.

We think it is important to remind readers that if this group of learners seemed to us to be satisfied and reasonably proficient in English given the length of the course, it is because they had a great deal of personal attention. They were at all times the addressees of messages and not simply eavesdroppers as is often the case when taped material is used. They not only had prolonged exposure to English but were constantly relating to speakers of that language over whom they had the amounts of control that are normal in face-to-face interaction.

Though it would be inaccurate to say that these learners were exposed to large quantities of caretaker speech, since they were not in a typical caretaking situation, we did make it a particular rule to be as smiling, well-disposed and uncritical with our learners as possible. A lot of the teaching this group had was of a humanistic flavour and can possibly be regarded as "right-hemisphere oriented" (see Asher, 1981).

Teaching in a silent period is very demanding, particularly in early lessons. To be the centre of attention as informant, teacher and entertainer for hours at a stretch while at the same time trying to monitor the reactions of fourteen people calls for a kind of presence and management style quite different from those advocated by the now traditional 'keep the teacher-talking-time to a minimum' approach.

We feel that the main areas which need to be looked into and experimented with now are those of teacher (re)training, materials production, the length of the *post*-silent period, syllabus design within a silent period and the related problem of how to provide learners with tangible proof of their individual progress.

Hopefully we have in this paper succeeded in instilling our enthusiasm for this exciting approach into the hearts of other members of the language teaching profession who will experiment for themselves and publish their findings.

NOTES

¹ A useful distinction between *speech* and *language* is drawn by Diller (1981). Subjects suffering from Wernicke's aphasia or from carbon monoxide poisoning often manifest little difficulty in being able to vocalize quite abundantly. They cannot however, because of the semantic deficits of their output and the severe limitations on their faculties of comprehension, be said to possess *language*.

² It seemed to us that the accounts of silent period experiments to be found in the literature did not require any further testing. What we were really interested in was trying out and perfecting the techniques and materials which could most profitably be used with non-speaking beginners.

³ For McDonough (1981, pp. 45-46) 'bottom to top' processing is the type which proceeds from sound (or letter) to sense. 'Top to bottom' processing proceeds in the opposite direction and is a more heuristic model of comprehension derived from that of Bever (1970) and Clark and Clark (1977).

⁴ This utterance is a nice example of a prefabricated pattern (see Krashen, 1981, p. 83; and Marton, 1983, p. 317).

⁵ Interestingly enough, this silent period turned out to be of the same length as that of the first field test reported in Asher, *et al.* (1974), but is, generally speaking, shorter than average.

⁶ Learners of foreign languages undoubtedly need to be trained to recognize that non-linear learning (cf. Winitz, 1981, p. 7) may be every bit as useful as more structurally defined learning which is thought by some to be associated with structurally defined teaching. It may be however, that some form of progression in the design of the exercises of the type suggested in Nord (1981) is necessary for psychological reasons.

⁷ We would like to thank Lonny Gold, formerly of the Ecole Française de Suggestopédie, Paris, who gave us our first experience of a suggestopaedia concert.

⁸ We would like to thank Diann Gruber of ESIEE, Paris, who first told us of this technique.

⁹ We would like to thank Bridget Francillard, Bernard Hoepffner and Heather Moore Rea of the Université Lyon 2 and Dr. M. A. Frankel of the British Council, Paris for their kind interest and collaboration.

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