

Why You Have To Listen First And Speak Later In Second Language Learning

If you've been following my articles on Second Language Acquisition, you know I've made a big deal about seeking to comprehend the language you've chosen to learn before trying to speak or produce in the language. I've used the imagery of a horse-drawn cart to illustrate the question of which comes first: learning grammar or listening-speaking?

I would still venture to guess that 99.9% of second-language instruction begins by forcing you to learn a list of out-of-context vocabulary coupled with mindless memorization of grammar rules. If you happen to love that sort of approach, then you will most likely develop some nice translation skills. However, you will develop little on the speaking side of the language. I've contended that grammar should be the cart that is drawn by the horse, which is the listening-speaking phenomenon that has taken place in our native language by the time we reach six or seven years of age.

If we had a thousand years to watch, we would not once see a lifeless cart pull the horse. We would always see plenty of horses pulling the cart and not vice versa.

I still get emails from readers insisting that I am wrong about this. So entrenched is the idea that unless a program of second-language acquisition is designed around certain components, a student's likelihood of success is hindered. I counter that argument by saying the dropout rate is so phenomenal (96%) in these traditional classes that this should speak for itself. It's a motivation killer.

I also get an inordinate amount of emails telling me that the person I quote a lot when discussing this issue of listening first and production in the language later, psychologist Stephen Krashen, is a nut. It seems that Professor Krashen is ridiculed and scorned because he did the unthinkable in academia and has made a small (big?) fortune in the field of linguistics. For this reason, I get all manner of emails telling me Krashen is a nut (and for what?...making money?) but, in spite of this, these people admit his theories are essentially correct.

So, to avoid getting emails telling me Stephen Krashen is a nut for being financially successful and is therefore an academic heretic (but essentially sound in his research), I promise not to quote Krashen. I will quote James Asher.

If you follow the world of linguistics, the term Total Physical Response should immediately pop into your head when you hear James Asher, Ph.D., mentioned in polite circles. Dr. James Asher is often considered the father of the Total Physical Response approach to second-language acquisition. This approach is premised upon the idea that we have a kind of hardwiring in our brains for speech-no matter the variety. Whether you are learning your first language, a second, a third, or more, what you are trying to engage is the acquiring of speech in that specific language using the hardwiring for speech in your brain. What Asher is saying, and that upon which Total Physical Response is based, is:

"...that language is internalized through a process of code breaking similar to first language development and that the process allows for a long period of listening and developing comprehension prior to production." (Wikipedia)

And yet, for some reason, it is assumed that to learn a new language other than our native tongue we must engage in a different process, which by design produces a huge failure rate in second-language learning in America.

I would love to have any of my readers who disagree with this idea show me any child in their immediate or remote experience who came out of the womb speaking first and comprehending speech second. The idea seems almost burned into the psyche that you have to engage in a process-traditional language classes-that develops fine exegetes of written text but does not develop the ability to speak or comprehend spoken language.

"Never do we observe infants in any culture or in any historical period showing language acquisition starting with production followed by comprehension." (James J. Asher, Ph.D.)

The hardwiring that we all have in our brains for speech, no matter if it is your native language or a new one could be pictured like a blank map. Remember in grade school geography when we were handed a map of the U.S. with the shapes of the states but no labels and we had to fill it in? Well, you could picture that for our innate language learning. A kind of outline of a language map that eventually gets filled in as we grow from 0 - 7 years of age by listening to our native tongue.

We first hear lots and lots of comprehensible input coupled with lots of visual and physical stimulation (also input). We begin to produce sounds that one day go from a primitive gurgling to comprehensible speech. The speech sounds crude but begins to "clean up" as we progress. But one fact that remains written in stone is that what filled in the language map was listening first, speaking in the language second, and learning something formal

about the language (learning correct grammar) third. This might suggest a Natural Order in language acquisition.

Many detractors will write that "we are not children and do not learn a second language like children."

Yet, the bilingual rate in America is still abysmally poor!

What is absolutely amazing is that there is no scientific evidence to support that second-speech acquisition (foreign-language learning) is any different than the child learning his native tongue and that one's age does not matter!

"Incidentally, there is no evidence that the "biological wiring" for language acquisition changes as the infant develops into childhood and then adulthood. And, indeed, our experiments (Asher, 2000) together with classroom observations of children and adults (Garcia, 2001) suggest that a linear progression from comprehension to production is imperative for most students (perhaps 95%) if they are to achieve multi-skill fluency in a second language. (James J. Asher, Ph.D.)

If, for the sake of argument, Asher is absolutely correct, then what are we doing by funneling thousands of dollars into classes of foreign language instruction that begin with reading, writing, speaking, and listening? Is this not short-circuiting the process of language acquisition?

Asher's Total Physical Response is an excellent attempt at devising a practical application of the research. It is worth reading about this approach, especially if you've tried and tried using the traditional approach to learn a second language, only to find yourself among those that fail.

"The evidence is clear, however, that a "progression" starting with production (teaching children and adults to talk, read or write) is an illusion since it results in a success rate of only 4% (Asher, 2000)." (James J. Asher, Ph.D.)

Sources:

Total Physical Response in First Year English by Francisco, Ph.D. Cabello, James J. Asher, and Barbara Stewards

Look I Can Talk : Teacher's Guidebook by Blaine Ray, James J. Asher, and Greg Rowe (Paperback)

Instructor's Notebook, How to Apply TPR For Best Results (Triple Expanded) by Ramiro Garcia and James J. Asher

Learning Another Language Through Actions by James J. Asher

About the Author

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