

Let 'Em Talk

By the way, have I ever mentioned that my wife and I have nine children? And, yes, they are all ours - seven born in France and two born in the U.S. They are all grown and gone now, but I remember a time when our dinner table would nightly be completely surrounded by hungry and energetic young ones - all anxious to recount at the same time the things they had done or seen that day.

I have to confess now that I was something of a "control freak". I wanted things in the home to be neat and I wanted conversation around the table to be orderly. Possibly taking the lead from Frank Gilbreth, the father in the book "Cheaper by the Dozen", I got it into my head at one point that I was going to rein in the flood of conversation that flowed unchecked each evening and I would insist that only one person would speak at a time and that we would all listen to that one person. Consequently, their topics of conversation would have to be of mutual interest to all at the table - from infants to adolescents. Right!!! All that accomplished was a sullen silence for a time until a growing cacophony would once again break out from all corners.



The Nesbitts...back in the day

It was unrealistic and unappreciated. Kids have to talk. They have adventures to recount, complaints to get off their chests and gibes of sibling rivalry to get in. Talking and seeing themselves being listened to is how they know that they matter. It's also how they learn to speak more effectively and properly, as their parents correct their speech and help them fill in the gaps in their knowledge when certain vocabulary escapes them.

In the first year world language classroom, listening and speaking are absolutely critical as well. Initially, they are the exclusive skills that need to be developed.

Whereas the online ULAT program is somewhat more conservative in this regard, introducing phonics and words in print for the first time on the 85th day of class, I was actually far more radical in my approach to reading and then writing while in the classroom. As a first year Spanish and French teacher, I would not let my high school students see the printed word until sometime during the first semester of their second year of daily language study. Class interaction was 100% oral for at least 5 quarters and the vast majority of conversation involved student interaction with me. There was no throwing students a grammar packet to work on at their desks and then checking in with them at the end of the period to correct it. I was "on duty" at all times.

An amusing anecdote regarding one of my elementary school students gives you a glimpse into just how adamant I was about prioritizing speaking and listening skills in the target language with beginners. Not only would I not speak English with my students, but I would even speak Spanish with non-Spanish speaking faculty members in the hallway if my students were present, using mime and gestures to get my ideas across to my bemused colleagues. One day, about 5 or 6 weeks into the school year, possibly in a moment of weakness, I decided that I would break down and communicate to my students in English at the beginning of one class. The next day, a mother e-mailed me to say that her wide-eyed child had said to her at home that evening, "Mom, you can't believe how fast Mr. Nesbitt is learning English!"

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It was tiring and inconvenient at times to constantly interact with my students in speech and with visual cues, but the fruit of that effort made it all worthwhile. When a high school teacher from a local public school came to visit my classes, she wrote in the summary of her visit: "I observed both Spanish I and Spanish II and was astounded by the level of the students' fluency...Students that experience language learning in this rich environment exhibit remarkable Spanish skills in the present, and will undoubtedly reap many rewards from this class as they continue their academic careers and studies of Spanish." Students consistently tested out of foreign language requirements as they headed off to college or found themselves well along toward a minor before they had even attended a day of class at the university. Many reported back that they were light years ahead of their college classmates in their ability to express themselves orally. One wrote, "I'm in my Spanish 301 class now, and first off, your accent sounds much better than my teacher's does, and she speaks in all Spanish, which confuses some people, but she speaks much slower than you do, so thanks so much for only speaking in Spanish from Spanish 1 all the way to Spanish 5."

And then there was the reward I felt before they ever left my classroom. By steadfastly refusing to use English from Day 1 and in all circumstances (except possibly when the fire alarm sounded), invariably there would come a day, usually in about February of the students' first year of study, when I would begin class with my usual recitation of the objectives I had and the activities that we would be performing that day. Then, I would suddenly notice a look of total comprehension on the faces of my students. Pausing and breaking with protocol, I would ask them in English, "Did you understand what I just told you?" They would respond, "Sure, you just told us that we will be talking about our daily routines, that half of us will review the lesson on the computers while the other half talks with you and then we'll switch. And you said that we'll be giving a 3-minute presentation on the topic tomorrow in class as a test." I would smile, thank myself for not having compromised up to that point in the school year and then press on.

The question "Did you understand what I just told you?" was actually a very valid one because I purposed to use the target language whether I thought they would understand me or not. Many times I am sure that I was the only one in the room who knew what I was saying, but I did not let that deter me. Even in those times, I knew that they were hearing the music and pronunciation of the language and that even those two elements alone were enough to make a total immersion in the target language preferable to their hearing English. During the first class period of the year, which was the only one conducted in English, I assured them that I did not expect them to understand me at all times and not to worry about it. I let them know that I would find a way to make clear to them anything they absolutely needed to know.

Some of you may be thinking, "Five whole quarters of study without ever seeing the printed word?!? How about their ability to write the language? That's got to set them back when it comes to reading and writing on AP tests or college coursework." Actually, quite the contrary is the case. When I posed that very concern to one of my former students, who was minoring in Spanish in one of our state's universities, she said that delaying exposure to the written word had actually helped her. She explained that her college classmates and she were required to do peer editing in their advanced writing class. She explained how difficult it was to understand her classmates' writing because they were essentially speaking English using Spanish words. By contrast, she was experiencing success because, before beginning with the writing process, she had already learned through intensive oral interaction in high school what the Spanish language was supposed to sound like, making her writing far more authentic.

Effective writing skills depend upon the foundation of oral fluency that preceded them.

All of that build-up (and a healthy dose of self-congratulation) is to make the following points:

1. As already emphasized ad nauseam, premature exposure to the written word condemns students to the habit of improper 5-step thought and inauthentic pronunciation based on the English phonics system.
2. Students who do not become comfortable with speaking their new language during the first year of studies, almost certainly never will.
3. A recognition of their progress in oral fluency, through their own self-awareness, others' observations of their surprising fluency and opportunities to interact in the target language with native speakers, improves students' self-image and heightens their appreciation for language study.
4. Reading fluency and writing authenticity are directly related to the strength of the oral foundation that precedes their development.

5. After training them in how to think like a native speaker of the second language, the first year teacher's most important job is to motivate and oblige students to speak.

With first year students, the two most important tasks are to train them to think like a native speaker and to motivate and oblige them to talk.

Do you want your language students to value your class and to feel good about themselves? Do you want them to succeed both in academia and in real world second language interaction? Do you want them to read the target language with ease and write it with authenticity? Then, lay a sound oral foundation and withhold the printed word from them until the right moment. Speak to them exclusively in the second language and don't worry too deeply if they don't understand you at all times. Most of all, don't follow my poor parental example. Let them talk. Nay, make them talk because (spoiler alert)...you can't steer a car until it's moving!

Language Teachers' Topics for Reflection

1. While serving as a classroom teacher, how long does the author say that he would wait before exposing his students to the printed word?
2. Realistically, what challenge does such an approach pose to the teacher?
3. What benefits are derived when a teacher eschews the use of the students' native language in class at all times?
4. What resulting obligations does this place on the teacher?
5. According to one of the author's former students, why does an exclusive focus on the spoken language initially actually enhance rather than discourage competent writing?

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