

THE ROLE OF COMPREHENSION AND EXPRESSION SKILLS IN LEANGUAGE LEARNING

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In order to be able to communicate face-to-face, whether in our mother tongue or in a foreign language, we obviously have to be able to understand what our interlocutor is saying and to express what we want to say ourselves in an intelligible manner. So, what we need to understand in the foreign language may well be different from the sort of things we need to say, according to the social role we are playing and this has implications for learning.

1. Mental mechanism involved in comprehension and expression are different. The brain does not function in the same way when we are interpreting a message as it does when we are expressing our intentions, ideas or feelings. Knowledge of these mechanisms is not necessary in order to learn a language, but it may be useful in choosing learning activities that take account of the difference just mentioned.

The process of comprehension involves recourse to hypothesis: when we are trying to understand what someone else is saying we construct hypotheses about what is being said on the basis of our knowledge of the situation or of the topic of conversation. This knowledge allows us to make predictions of varying degrees of precision about what is being said, what might have been said earlier or what might follow. Clues picked up along the way while our interlocutor is speaking help to prove

or disprove these hypotheses. These clues may be either linguistic or visual. In fact, to understand it is not necessary to grasp every single sound or every word [1].

Expressing oneself, on the other hand, involves putting into operation in a given situation all the communicative resources available to an individual who needs or wants to express an idea or feeling, or to obtain something from someone, or to get to know someone. The priority is making oneself understood by one's interlocutors because we need to keep in mind the simple fact that expression is not a unilateral but a two-way process: it involves taking into account what our interlocutors say, using their reactions to continually adjust what we say and how we say it. For example, if one of the interlocutors clearly disagrees with what another is saying, or cannot understand it, this will usually cause the speaker to change or give up what he is saying [1].

2. We often come up against difficulties in understanding or in expressing ourselves in a foreign language. However, if we stop think, we realize that even in our mother tongue there are things that we understand more easily than others, or that we have greater difficulty in expressing than others. It is generally the case that in our mother tongue we can usually understand more kinds of discourse that we can actually produce. For example, patients can follow the medical discourse of their family doctor without being doctors themselves, and students can understand a teacher's discourse even though they could not teach a class. We can understand children and foreigners, too, even though they do not talk like us. In all these cases, we understand without necessarily being able to speak in the same way. Our ability to understand, however, has its limits. It depends, for example, on how familiar we are with the field of knowledge in question [2]. Similarly, our ability to express ourselves in our mother tongue also has its limits.

3. Another difference between comprehension and expression concerns the way the two skills are used in everyday life. Whilst we rarely speak unless listeners are present, we frequently carry out some kind of comprehension activity when we are on our own. In an age where the media are everywhere, we probably find ourselves listening or reading – understanding – more often than in situations where we need to

express ourselves. When we get up in the morning, we listen to the weather forecast to know what kind of day it will be; on the way to work we might listen to the news in the car or read on the bus, train or underground; in the evening we watch television or read in bed. When we are occupied in doing any of these things, we are engaged in a comprehension activity which does not necessarily involve expression of any kind.

4. The points mentioned above have important implications for language learning. In the classroom, teachers and learners usually want to do a considerable amount of expression work, because they believe that learning to speak is both more important (one has things one wants to say) and more difficult (there are so many different things to deal with). So work on comprehension is often neglected at the expense of work on expression. But when learners actually come into contact with people whose language they are studying, they realize two things: firstly, that it is often easier to express oneself than they had thought because, as we have seen, one can often “middle through” or “make oneself understood” with very limited resources indeed, but, secondly, that it is much more difficult than they thought to understand their interlocutors. They find that they speak “terribly fast”, that they have “strong accents” or that they “swallow their words”, and so on [2]. Not if learners have difficulty in understanding native speakers when they are in the country where the language is spoken, it is because they have not been adequately or appropriately prepared.

Work which focuses specifically on comprehension (for example, studying authentic recordings of native speakers) can also help to improve expression, because the more you are able to understand, the more easily you can grasp how the language works and how things are said. Improving one’s ability to express oneself in a foreign language depends to a great extent on ability to observe and assimilate the way native speakers talk.

To sum up, comprehension and expression are two separate activities which can be carried out at different times and which involve their own specific mental processes. There are language learning materials and exercises which train learners specifically in either of the skills. This training can be undertaken on one skill or the other,

according to the needs of the moment, but it is important to remember that if you only practice speaking, you are unlikely to improve your capacity to understand. Try not to neglect either skill, even if you have a preference for one or the other, and remember that it is important to choose materials and tasks relevant to the skill you want to improve.

Bibliography:

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2. Hopkins A. and Potter J. 1994. Look Ahead 1, Classroom Course. Longman.