How to Overcome Obstacles to Improve Receptive Skills

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Abstract: This article examines the difficulties that students studying a foreign language face when moving to more advanced levels, describes the features of these difficulties that will help teachers and, possibly, the students themselves, detect them in time. The article also suggests methods and techniques to prevent and overcome their negative impact on the learning process and to improve receptive skills.

Keywords: language difficulties, to improve, language plateau, receptive skills, error correction.

With an intermediate level of proficiency in a foreign language, a student already has enough knowledge to communicate confidently in it. The amount of information that needs to be studied for noticeable progress is already significantly greater compared to that presented at the basic and initial levels. Thus, many students who start learning English succeed in the initial stages, regardless of the methods used. However, over time, it becomes more and more difficult for the student to remember new material. The teacher also notices that the information, no matter how interesting and unusual it is presented, is no longer so easily absorbed by the student. The realization that their goal of improving English as a means of communication has turned out to be unattainable discourages students from continuing to study a foreign language. They understand that they already know a lot about English, but at the same time they cannot say that they know it. It is during this period that students give up learning English. Later, for various reasons, they resume studying foreign languages, but soon face the same problem.

Let us dwell in more detail on the first of the above problems: uneven development of productive and receptive skills. To recognize this situation in your students, you need to understand how it manifests itself. First, the student or teacher notices that while the student's receptive skills continue to develop, his productive skills remain at about the same level. Lexical units and grammatical structures are recognized by the student when listening or reading the text, but are not used by him in speech.

The student's receptive competence (the language he can understand) is always at a higher level of development than his productive competence (the language he can produce). So, he can read and even memorize the poems of William Blake, but he is unlikely to be able to write the same depth of thought and mastery of the stylistic means of the poem's language. But this does not prevent him from understanding and admiring the poet's work.

Traditionally, in teaching a foreign language, this fact is presented in the division of knowledge into active and passive. This is especially noticeable when it comes to students' vocabulary. The implication is that the student must understand many more words than he can use in his speech. It is generally accepted in the methodology of teaching foreign languages that a new word first becomes part of the learner's passive vocabulary and only then becomes active. Stephen Krashen [3] believes that in learning a foreign language, teachers should place more emphasis on developing and improving passive competencies rather than active ones, and argues that productive skills will naturally develop on the basis of passive ones.

However, in practice, the experience of many foreign language learners proves the opposite. They recognize with disappointment the fact that they do not possess productive skills at the desired level, despite the good level of development of passive ones. For some reason, students may not be able to apply their language knowledge directly into practice. This, as Fan Yi [2] emphasizes, leads to increased levels of anxiety and frustration. Students may end up losing confidence and determination, and their motivation to continue learning a foreign language may disappear.

In view of the above facts, the assumption that productive skills naturally develop from receptive skills is no longer found in recent theories of foreign language acquisition. Two other factors are important if we want to minimize the gap between productive and receptive skills: noticing and focused output [1]. Let us examine each of these hypotheses in more detail.

Regarding the first of the above-mentioned hypotheses, R. Schmidt [4] emphasized the role of consciousness in language learning, especially the role of attention. He argued that in order for students to master new units from what they heard/read, it is necessary that they notice them and pay attention to them. According to R. Schmidt, we will not learn anything from what we read/hear until we note something special about it.

Awareness of the features of speech and texts that we hear or read can become the very trigger that activates the first stage of the process of including new units in the language competence of students. Thus, analyzing the acquisition of the first, native language, Dan Slobin [5] noted: "The only linguistic material that can participate in the "creation" of a child's language is segments of speech that attract his attention sufficiently to be noticed and remembered."

R. Schmidt [4] explains his point of view by further distinguishing between what the student hears/reads (input) and that part of what he hears/reads that he ultimately pays attention to (intake). And only the latter, according to R. Schmidt, can act as the basis for the development of productive language skills. In his study of his mastery of Portuguese, Schmidt discovered a close relationship between paying attention to the features of the texts he heard/read and the subsequent appearance of the features he noted in his speech.

So, after listening and working on understanding the speech heard, the teacher can use the listened text as a basis for improving students' language awareness. In this case, students listen to the text again in order to complete the following tasks. Students are given a printed version of the text with some changes. The students' task is to listen and find the difference between the audio and printed versions of the text. This task can be aimed both at replenishing students' vocabulary and at improving their grammatical skills. Printed text may present simpler lexemes, explanations of idioms, while students need to hear a more complex lexeme, the idiom itself. Some sentences in a printed text can be paraphrased with simpler grammar, while students need to hear new/more complex grammatical construction.

Another option for working with a printed version of the listening text is to fill in the gaps, the so-called close text. In order to draw students' attention to certain lexical or grammatical structures, the teacher may ask them to continue the sentence. In this case, students are not given the full version of the text they are listening to, but only some sentences, or rather, the beginning of some sentences from the text. Students listen to the audio again to continue these sentences. You can also provide students with a list of specific words/expressions, ask them to listen to the text again and note those lexemes/phrases/idioms that appear in the audio.

In all of the above exercises, the teacher creates conditions for the student to pay attention to the necessary lexical and grammatical constructions. Next, the teacher arranges the work in such a way that students practice new language material in oral and/or written speech, i.e. moves to focused language practice.

Merrill Swain writes that a student's faster and more successful mastery of a foreign language is facilitated by his desire to convey his thoughts so that they are understood by the interlocutor and the communicative goal is achieved. Foreign language learners need to carefully structure and

regulate their utterances so that new language structures become part of their speech. By regulated utterances, the linguist means the conscious use of the target language material in speech. The teacher selects exercises for classes in such a way that they encourage students to use target structures in oral and written speech [5]. Such tasks expand and restructure students' knowledge, thereby helping them develop and improve productive language skills. The focused speech practice hypothesis states a very obvious truth: in order to master new language material, it must be purposefully practiced.

Speaking about the practice of teaching a foreign language, after working on receptive language skills, for example, listening comprehension, the teacher selects such tasks so that the selected new language material is practiced and honed in students' oral and written speech. Among such tasks, we can offer, for example, filling in gaps in sentences with new expressions and constructions. Students can also create dialogues based on the model, using key expressions and structures. The teacher could also have students write questions with key vocabulary/grammar, then ask their partner, and after working in pairs, share their partner's answers with the whole group. In addition to filling out ready-made sentences with blanks, students can compose such sentences for their classmates.

One of the tasks may be to compose a more voluminous oral or written statement (describing a picture, writing an essay, expressing one's own opinion on an issue) using key language material. Thus, in foreign language classes, the teacher deliberately creates situations in which students need to resort to key lexical or grammatical material. Next, we will describe in more detail how fossilized errors in students' speech prevent them from moving to a more advanced level of proficiency in a foreign language and how a teacher can help students overcome this problem. First, we need to define fossilized bugs. Fossilized means "ossified, frozen." These are those errors (both grammatical and pronunciation) that have become permanent in the student's speech and remain, despite the progress of his communication skills [2].

Summarizing all of the above, we can note that the transition from intermediate to upper-intermediate and advanced levels of foreign language proficiency can become a crisis for students due to the complexity of the language material and its volume necessary for noticeable progress. A so-called language plateau appears. Accustomed to relatively quick results due to the peculiarities of mastering a foreign language at the initial stages, students do not see progress, lose motivation and desire to continue learning the language. There are five main reasons that hinder the progress of students who speak a language at an intermediate level when moving to a higher level: unevenly developed productive and receptive skills; fossilized bugs; poor vocabulary; neglect of more complex lexical and grammatical structures; lack of authenticity of speech. Thus, when working on the development of productive and receptive skills, the teacher should remember that in order to introduce new lexical and grammatical constructions into the student's speech, hard and conscious work is necessary. The student must pay attention to these structures in the texts he listens to or read and then use them in his speech (hypotheses of paying attention and focused speech practice). The algorithm for working on fossilized errors also includes paying attention to these errors and conscious, focused work on correcting them. Despite the fact that the general plan for preventing and solving these problems is the same, the methods of working with each aspect differ, especially in the receptive skills aspect

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