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Course Title: **The Silent Period Hypothesis**

1. ***Definition***

One of the important characteristics of learning strategies is that students are exposed to ample comprehensible input during a 'silent period'. Terrell (1982) says acquisition does not take place by listening to speech that is not understood by the student. Krashen (1985) claims that the optimal level of the input should contain: (input + 1), structures slightly beyond the acquirer's current state of competence. Krashen also introduces Cross's research (1977) and argues that not only the level of the input but also the amount of comprehensible input plays an important role in child language acquisition. According to Cross, children rapidly acquiring language abilities usually heard a great deal of comprehensible input.

1. ***Chracteristics***

* Among the characteristics of these strategies is that they are designed not only to avoid oral practice in initial phases but also to make students demonstrate their comprehension of materials in a variety of non-verbal ways. The difference between these strategies and those of the traditional audio-lingual or other attempts to teach listening and speaking of a foreign language almost simultaneously is additional non-verbal responses as well as 'lack' of oral practice. As we have already seen, in the case of Asher's technique, students respond physically. Postovsky makes use of writing as a non-verbal response. In the Comprehension Method, students choose correct answers by touching the panel of the machine, TAPAC. In the Natural Approach, students can respond physically or by uttering simple words such as peers' names or "Yes"/'No", or even in their first language.
* These two points above explain why the traditional way exposing students to authentic English does not work. It is often proposed by some ESL/EFL teachers that listening comprehension is so important that it is useful to let students watch TV programs produced in English speaking countries, or, if students are young, to let them listen to nursery rhymes recorded by a native speaker of English. Then, it is assumed, the more the students are exposed to this kind of authentic English, the more chance they have to master listening comprehension ability. These activities may be useful to motivate students in learning English, but are not enough by themselves. Firstly, if the input is far above the students' comprehension, it will be very painful, frustrating and of little use for the students to keep listening to it. Secondly, if the students are satisfied just with watching TV programs or listening to records, there is no active response on the part of the students.
* The language acquiring process is always an interaction of stimuli-responses on both sides. Children acquiring a language in natural settings are not passive at all. Even in a 'silent period', there is no such thing as one-way communication. Even a new-born baby can respond to its parents or caretakers by stopping crying or changing the tones of its cries. In addition to this, it is often reported that children who have been taken care of using TV programs show a delay in language acquisition. Though TV programs are made up of audio-visual stimuli, they do not demand viewers to respond to them. They just keep sending stimuli independently of the viewers.

1. ***Infant Language Acquisition***

* In a natural setting, caretakers and teachers try to simplify their speech using many contexts and referents which make the verbal input comprehensible for children. In this kind of environment, children always respond to verbal stimuli in some way. Through such interactions children rapidly internalize a language.
* The most important point for ESL/EFL teachers seems to make the input comprehensible for their students and also to choose the optimum mode of non-verbal response according to the age and learning styles of students. It may vary widely depending on the class size, length of class time, students' interests and objectives, and so on. If teachers, after taking all these things into consideration, can develop suitable teaching methods and materials, delayed oral practice can be efficiently realized in the classroom situation.

1. ***Lowering Anxiety***

* Another characteristic of this approach is that allowing students to be silent in class serves to present a learning situation with less anxiety. To put it in another way, in a classroom with this kind of approach, the students receive comprehensible input in a low anxiety environment. Asher (1966:81) mentioned that to force speaking from the beginning of training may be somewhat analogous to electroshock experiments with rats. If students are compelled to utter alien sounds from the start of training, the forced noise-making may function as a stressful stimulus similar to electroshock for rats and it may tend to inhibit understanding. Terrell (1977:333) points out that the standard problem of embarrassment is reduced considerably by allowing the students to respond in their first language.
* This idea is well explained by the 'filter' theory discussed precisely in Dulay et al. (1982). According to this theory, the filter is a part of the internal processing system that subconsciously screens incoming language based on motives, need, attitudes, or emotions. Incoming language data can be filtered out depending on the students' affective conditions. Research has shown that the less anxious the learner, the better language acquisition proceeds. Similarly, relaxed and comfortable students apparently can learn more in shorter periods of time.
* This may be especially true for the learners who are past puberty. Most of them are self-conscious and they are anxious and nervous about making errors in front of their peers and very sensitive to sounding strange. Therefore we can say students in an L2 classroom, especially at high school or adult levels, feel much more comfortable and acquire the target language more rapidly if they are not compelled to respond until they feel ready.

1. ***Authentic Model***

* The next characteristic of this approach is that teachers can give students only an authentic model of the target language in class. ESL/EFL teachers always try hard to give their students an authentic model of English. When teachers are non-native speakers of English, they usually make use of tape-recorders. But ironically enough, the more active the oral activities become, the less the students are exposed to a target language. As Postovsky mentioned (1974:231), even if ESL teachers are native speakers of English and can present students with an authentic model, in the audio-lingual class where each student is vocally active, students hear themselves more than they hear the teacher. The auditory input which they are processing, then, is not the authentic language, but the classroom dialect rich with all the distortions. This is not the case in a delayed oral practice approach. Students only hear their teachers and/or taped voices.

1. ***Problem-solving***

* The other characteristic of this approach is to encourage students to problem-solve and guess at the meaning of unfamiliar elements in foreign utterances on the basis of context and other cues in the given linguistic environment. Teachers should not present grammar as a set, but rather should help students construct their own grammar through problem-solving. Children acquiring a language in natural settings learn grammar in this way. Swaffar and Woodruff (1978:29) mentioned that in their training "preparations with the aid of a dictionary were actively discouraged, and students were not penalized for incorrect guesses."
* Once the students are familiar with the way of problem-solving, then they will not have any trouble confronting unknown utterances. According to Asher's experiments (1972:138), the experimental students showed high competence with novel utterances, which they had never heard before.