

ARTICLE #25:

Why can't I understand when people speak?

By Julio Foppoli

THE SITUATION

Let's start off by understanding how language acquisition takes place.

In first language acquisition, first we develop listening & comprehension skills, later we speak, much later we learn to read and much later to write.



You can see this in a baby. By the time she is two years old, she can understand almost anything their parents are saying. However, when she has to speak, her vocabulary is limited. She can express her ideas using simple words. A couple of years later in life, she will learn how to read and how to write.

Parents speak to the child “naturally”

In Second Language Acquisition, *ideally*, the progression should be the same. Any good language program should take the natural order of language acquisition and focus on developing vocabulary and listening comprehension skills first, followed closely by speaking skills.

Just like in first language acquisition, there is a period in which a person may understand a lot, but s/he may still be unable to express their ideas accurately.

That is completely normal and is known as the “silent period” of language acquisition. In some individuals this period is shorter than in others, but it is always there, and it is a good thing. It is perfectly normal to have this delay in terms of language production.

In an ideal situation, listening comprehension should always precede speaking; you should always be able to understand more than you can produce.

THE PROBLEM

Of course, note that I said “*In an Ideal Situation*”. Unfortunately, most Spanish language programs put the cart before the horse. They have it all wrong. Why? They almost completely ignore listening comprehension and focus mostly on reading and writing and to a much lesser extent speaking. When it comes to listening comprehension, the work is almost ludicrous or non-existent. Don't take me wrong, all programs have some listening component, but it is simplified to make it easier for learners to understand. Although this seems logical, in reality it is counterproductive.

You see, in first language acquisition, when parents talk to their children, other than some funny voices here and there, in general they always speak at a normal pace of speech, they do not slow down or try to pronounce words more clearly. They just speak the way they always do. And that is why we learn our mother tongue so perfectly. And we can understand anything!

But the audio comprehension component in 99% of Spanish language programs is just appalling.

In those recordings you will find professional speakers saying very simple phrases and very, very slowly. This causes more harm than good because learners get used to a type of Spanish that is just NOT real. It is completely unnatural. From day 1, most students hear a simplistic variety of Spanish that they will never find in the real world. Actually, if you make any native Spanish speaker listen to those audio recordings they won't be able to help laughing at how ridiculous those materials are. No wonder why so many people that have studied Spanish for years travel abroad and feel completely frustrated when they cannot understand “real” people in the street.



[Professional speakers sound great, but does the person in the street speak like they do?]

The Problem Gets Worse

As we have seen, the listening materials that Spanish learners get from their courses are simplified to help them understand the language. This does NOT happen in first language acquisition and creates a huge problem in the mid-long term for the student. Why?

In most cases students do reading and writing first, followed by some listening of that material, and then some speaking. And as we saw before, the listening materials are unnatural_ to say the least.

However, most programs are very good at developing reading and writing, so the learner keeps getting more and more advanced when it comes to those two skills, and even speaking, but their listening comprehension starts to lag behind.

After some time working like this, their skills are at completely different stages. In my many years as a language specialist I have seen many “very” advanced Spanish learners who could read any book, even books for native Spanish speakers, they could write better than I do in Spanish, and they could even speak perfectly. However, they could barely understand any Spanish. Their listening comprehension skills were basic or pre-intermediate in the best of cases. Sometimes even basic phrases seemed to be eluding them. They just could not get them if someone was speaking to them naturally.

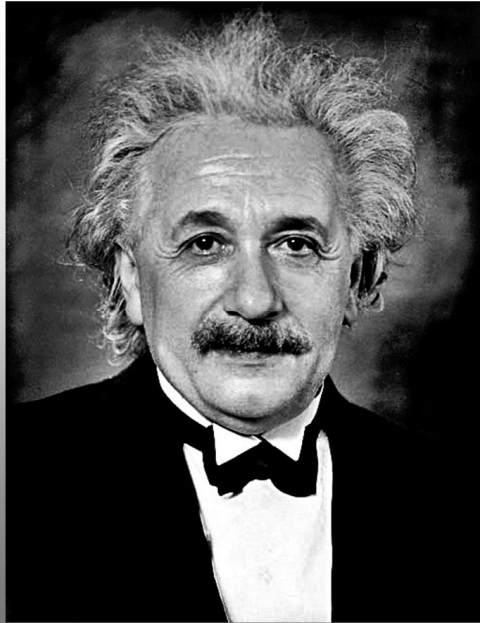


[Without the appropriate listening comprehension training, even advanced Spanish learners may struggle to understand basic Spanish conversations]

Mind you, this is a very common scenario that most language courses seem to ignore with the wishful thinking that one day the student's brain will just miraculously "click" and they will be able to understand anyone, anywhere with ease. Sorry to be the one to break it to you but this never happens.

If you expect different results, change what you are doing.

As Einstein once put it:



“Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results.”

Albert Einstein

www.TheSpanishSubjunctive.com

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In other words, unless you change what you are doing, do not expect different results. I have received students who had studied Spanish like this for over 40 years (YES!!! 40 YEARS!!!) and could not understand Spanish. Doing more of the same work that places Reading and Writing first, and Speaking and Listening second will NOT get you to understand real people. In the best of cases you will be able to express yourself perfectly, but you will need to start to pray that you will understand when someone says something to you. That is definitely a horrible situation that unfortunately thousands upon thousands of learners face every day. No learner should “hope” to understand the person talking to them. They need to be confident that no matter who is in front of them, they will understand them.

If this is your problem, or if you are just giving your first steps in the language, here come the good news. Developing listening comprehension is NOT a mystery and it is not as hard as it seems. Most people struggle simply because they are never trained in this skill. However, with a solid program in place, understanding people should be as predictable as the result of any math equation. This is the area I specialize in and that I will discuss with you soon in my next article.

Until next time.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Julio Foppoli". The signature is written in a cursive style and is enclosed within a hand-drawn rectangular box that is slightly tilted.

Julio Foppoli
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