# Utilizing Crosstalk to Help Older Adult Language Learners Attain Comprehensible Input

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## Abstract

The aim of this study was to understand how a small group of older Taiwanese language learners conceived of their ability to learn English, how they felt about Crosstalk learning, and what factors constrained their progress. Though language learning strategies have been testing for centuries, there is a tendency for English education to undervalue the listening skill. This paper proposed that listening comprehension, not the speaking itself, is the key to help adult language learners to become fluent speakers. Research theory was based on the Crosstalk principle that languages are acquired through comprehensible input and not by the practice of output. Results of the questionnaires showed that participants became more actively involved in the learning process, found it interesting before they could actually produce spoken English. In addition, observations and interviews with the subjects suggested that, during the process of drawing, gesturing, elements of TPR (total physical response), very high degrees of understanding, attention, and motivation were maintained in the conversation although both parties were speaking in their native languages. Hence, how to teach, not when to teach, is the rationale justified to help the elderly learners to attain fluent speaking ability.

**Keywords:** crosstalk, comprehensible input, metacognition, prior knowledge

## 1. Introduction

The statistics of the population trend of the *Taiwan Year Book 2006* revealed the fact that the total fertility rate (TFR) of Taiwanese women have dropped drastically to about 1.18. Furthermore, a phenomenon of "late marriage, late pregnancy, and few children" has greatly affected Taiwanese population structure. Taiwan has inevitably become a country of an ageing population.

To cope with the impact of an ageing population, Taiwan government aims at promoting the welfare of the senior population through education and preventive health care. On one hand, medical reports and evidences suggested that bilingualism contributed delaying dementia compared to monolingual older adults. On the other hand, Hubenthal (2004) argued that older adult language learning is a psychological process that occurs within certain environments. Personal characteristics, structural factors that affect participation in courses, and sociocultural context may all influence language learning.

Although various hypotheses concerning the second language acquisition stressed that learners are unable to acquire a full command of language because after puberty, the comprehensible input does not occur. The assumption, hence, held that older adult language learners can never learn language well. Hence, there is an urgent need to further understand the relationship between second language learning and older adult second language learners. That is, whether the fossilized grammar and the grammar translation approaches help the older adults to speak the target language should be clarified.

Recently, a central feature of the ESL communicative

approach has encouraged the speaking practice. Many language teachers strengthened the slogans, "the earlier the better". However, this study proposed to encourage listening first especially before the elderly second language learners can actually attain speaking ability. In addition to the natural ageing symptoms and medical consideration, it is also important for educators to explore the potential problems that the elderly learners face and some effective strategies that help old adult learners benefit from the second language learning.

Specially, researcher like Smith (2004) stressed that there is no need to remove the accent of one's mother tongue while learning the new language. That is, the purpose of second language teaching is not approaching the accent of native speakers of English. In other words, it is not a flaw having the mother tongue accent. If it is difficult for the elderly to imitate native speakers' accent, there is no need to ask the learners to reach the standard pronunciation. Thus, for older language learners, unable to cope with phonetic or phonemic awareness will not minimize them learning the second language.

This study integrated Crosstalk to the teaching. The central conceptual of Crosstalk lies in the belief that speaking occurs naturally after comprehensible inputs have been provided. Therefore, the assumption this study held was that the best way to speak is not by speaking. The essential strategy for the elderly learners to speak is to listen to the target language with the comprehensible message. After immersed in the target language for enough amount of time, the adult language learners will attain speaking ability in a natural way.

In addition to the pedagogical strategies and learners' varying learning styles, language teacher plays the most pivotal role in the learning process of those old adult language learners. It is decisive for teachers to create a learning environment that takes both the real life experiences and the individual differences of the elderly into account.

In essence, a language teacher should be empathic to the elderly students. Most of the older learners study for interest, not for scores or degree. Hence, adult student characteristics that differ from those of traditional young students should be also considered. The special traits of the elderly affect teaching techniques including hesitation to speak in class, concern more for correctness than communication, and hearing and vision problems. If the professional teacher respects the wisdom and experience of the elderly students, a respectful exchange and mutual learning will be created.

As the Chinese proverb contends, a teacher should also be a learner. An effective teacher learns from the abundant resources his elderly students bring along. He then successfully employs and applies themes of comprehensible message into the curriculum. Only in a comfortable and mutual caring setting can language learning for older adults be affirmative and enjoyable. There is no reason to denote that the elders are not competent second language learners.

## 1.1 The Critical Period Hypothesis

The basic concept of the Critical Period Hypothesis (Lenneberg, 1967) suggested that learners are unable to acquire a full command of language if comprehensible input does not occur especially before puberty. The assumption of the CP hypothesis claimed that the elderly are not able to learn language well due to the neurotically ageing problems. Therefore, one of the stereotypes for older adult language learners is that they can never learn language well (Hakuta, 2001). Moreover, DeKeyser (2000) suggested that, somewhere between the ages of 6 and 17, people lose the ability to intake the acoustic patterns of language because of the ageing phenomenon of the brain.

On the contrary, the rejection of the CP Hypothesis has also had a critical role in second language learning given that it advocated that adults can learn language like children. Flege and Liu (2001) held that although age or neurological development might constrain L2 learning, when the speakers receive the rich input that is needed for successful language learning, L2 acquisition will be obtained. Furthermore, Renandya, Rajan, and Jacobs (1987) argued that it is appropriate to provide language and literacy instruction for learners of all ages if teachers would increase comprehensible variation in their teaching and differentiate instruction to better meet the needs of the individual learners.

## 1.2 The Comprehensible Input

Similar to Krashen's (1982) Natural Approach, Barasch and Vaughan (1994), dealt with the listening issue. They held that the ability to speak fluently in a second language will be attained naturally along with time when provided with plenty of comprehensible inputs. Their concept most relevant to Crosstalk is the input hypothesis claiming that learners acquire language in only one way. That is, by receiving comprehensible input or by understanding messages.

In addition, ZPD (zone of proximal development) identified by Vygotsky (1978), delineated how children learn language. The ZPD (zone of proximal development) stressed that the child's cognitive skills are cultivated with the help of a

more skilled person. This assistance allows those skills to rise to a higher level that the child can be accomplished.

Winitz (1981) found that until learners could understand the message of adult conversation, some learning situations discouraged students from speaking especially to those who did not live in the country of the target language. He also stressed the importance of putting the entire emphasis on comprehensible inputs, including comprehension of speakers who are communicating with them.

Listening comprehension, on the other hand, has its psychological advantage in the ESL classroom. Vandergrift (1999) found that if a student is pressured to speak without comprehensible listening which helps internalize the sounds, pronunciation, and speech patterns, the result can be frustrating because anxiety and fossilization can interfere with language acquisition.

Moreover, Smith (2004) held that information exists only when it reduces uncertainty. Comprehension depends on what an individual already knows and needs to know. When students can not comprehend, then they can not predict, and therefore, they can not ask questions.

## 1.3 The Silent Period

Many researchers stressed that the best way to speak is by listening. Challenger (1998) claimed that children usually listen while the adult tries to talk back. However, 12 to 18 months later children speak natively because listening to the target language would build the language structures right before communicating.

In addition, Blair (1991) referred to this pre-production phase the silent period. Though the child still may produce irregular speaking formats, the point is their spontaneity. In contrast, adults, when utter, usually contrive sentences by hesitation or even murmuring. Furthermore, he delineated that the contrived speaking damages adults, even when the structure is correct. Consciously thinking up sentences using translations, rules, substitutions, expansions are not natural speaking and they harm the learners from speaking spontaneously.

A typical way adults try to struggle to speak is from a sound trace. Lewis (1993) noted that, in general, if a language learner wants to be like a native speaker, just listen like a child. Language learners have to build the sound from their L1 or from the prior knowledge of phonetics. Code switch is found by accented sounds and deliberate speeches which eventually cause

fossilize. Jones (1985) quoted this as 'contamination of the acoustic imprint'.

## 1.4 The Crosstalk

The Crosstalk is termed by Dr Marvin Brown in 1985, the founder of ALG (Automatic Language Growth) in Thailand. He claimed that it is the process of communication between two or more speakers who are attempting to communicate with each other in different languages of their mother tongues. Moreover, they use non-verbal communication such as eye contact or body language to convey meaning in the conversation. Learners understand the content of the conversation and are able to identify meanings of individual words. Significantly, Crosstalk does not focus on speaking, and it encourages students not to speak before speaking occurs (as cited in ALG, 2009).

Based on Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Crosstalk bases its central conceptual on offering understandable experience to the beginners. Crosstalk is based on the principle that languages are acquired through comprehensible input and not by the practice of output. It is a non-verbal communication conveying meaningful themes to improve learners' listening comprehension and speaking output. In addition, it combines the technique of storytelling to expose learners to the target language. It is administered by two teachers telling stories about their personal experiences, cultural events, current news, and the modern trends. Crosstalk techniques can be used for storytelling to a group, interactive storytelling to help understanding (as cited in ALG, 2009).

The central conceptual of Crosstalk lies in the belief that speaking occurs naturally after comprehensible inputs have been provided. Literally, Verwoert (2001) defined Crosstalk a disturbance caused by the electric or magnetic fields of one telecommunication signal affecting a signal in an adjacent circuit. Marcus (2003) used the term 'Crosstalk' when talking about semantic ambiguity or confusion arising in the study of English.

In addition, Richards and Rogers (2001) suggested that Crosstalk is an approach. It does not have a set of instructional designs, nor is it a teaching with specific steps for both learners and teachers to follow. It can be added to any pedagogical approach or methodology as a supplementary activity. Significantly, Marshall (2009) found that Crosstalk increases confidence to speak English and it makes guessing of new vocabulary easy. Most importantly, Crosstalk used real English

in authentic communication rather than focusing on patterns and forms.

Although Crosstalk has been very popular in foreign country like Thailand, literature about using Crosstalk to investigate situations of the older adults concerning foreign language learning is limited and scarce. Hence, the related research is worth further effort studying.

## 1.5 Medical Reports Related to Bilingualism and Cognition

Studies demonstrated that learning ability does not decline with age (Science Daily, 2004). If older people remain healthy, their intellectual abilities and skills do not decline. In other words, once the elderly have developed their cognitive abilities, unless they are both mentally and physically ill, learning languages may not be as difficult as the stereotype that most people hold.

Generally speaking, elder adult learners have ageing problems such as eyesight or hearing deterioration, language teacher can create a comfortable learning environment by adjusting or compensating those problems. Language learning, hence, can be a very positive undertaking for the elderly people.

Specially, recent literature in neurology indicated that older adults who are free of Alzheimer's disease are likely to have engaged in mentally stimulating leisure activities such as reading books and learning a new language (EurekAlert, 2004). The current findings demonstrate the link between people with Alzheimer's and the less mentally stimulating careers which demand less creative thinking or manipulation of data. According to researchers at University Hospitals of Cleveland and Case Western Reserve University School of Medicine, the higher levels of mental demands increase brain cell activity, which help maintain a 'reserve' of brain cells that resist symptoms of Alzheimer's disease.

Furthermore, being bilingual helps delay age-related cognitive decline (EurekAlert, 2004). Medical findings found that being able to speak two languages may prevent some of the cognitive decline as people grow old. During the research period, the bilinguals responded faster toward the stimuli than their monolingual counterparts. In short, bilingualism offers a wide spread benefits across complex cognitive tasks and thus reduces the age-related decline of cognitive process.

More significantly, Canadian scientists found that bilingualism contributes delaying dementia by four years compared to monolingual older adults (Science Daily, 2007). This study conformed to the early scientific literature that lifestyle factors such as bilingual education, physical activity, and social engagement help build "cognitive reserve", which provides a protective function against the onset of dementia symptoms as people age. The research team found that speaking two languages enhances attention and cognitive control in both children and older adults. They also found that the mean age of dementia in the bilingual group was 75.5 years while their monolingual peers was 71.4 years, implying the four-year delay of bilingual patients.

## 1.6 Teaching Older Adult Learners

For the elderly, age is not the only variable in terms of foreign language learning. Among the critical elements, motivation and learning styles all influence the effect of language learning immensely. Hence, Brown (1994) held that if language teacher should accommodate individual learning styles with suitable pedagogical strategies, learners' motivations, language performances, as well as learning effect will be greatly elevated.

Speed in classroom exercise such as oral language drills should be taken into account. For older adults, fast-paced practices and competitive activities which emphasize auditory and visual use are inappropriate (Schleppegrell, 1987). Moreover, instruction should be relevant to older learners. Instead of speed, self-pace should be allowed. Visual and vocal reinforcement will facilitate language learning (Hubenthal, 2004). For instance, enlarging the size of the letters on the blackboard, adjusting the volume of the audiovisual equipments, paying attention to the noise, small group discussion, cooperative learning, repetition, immediate and remedial assistance, bilingual tutor in the classroom, and constant care and encouragement, are all effective approaches that benefit old adult language learners.

As to the assessments, given that the responses of the old adult learners might be slower, language teacher should be sensitive to different variations of learners, allow more time to answer, reduce pressure, and encourage them to organize and express themselves. A language teacher should be flexible, be able to accommodate differences, and facilitate learning. In sum, an English teacher should put the needs of old adult language learners in priority (Challenger, 1998).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1 Subjects

The subjects of this study were about 25 participants who are 45 to 52 years of age. They were both the non-English full time and part time teachers at a university of technology. There were 8 male and 17 female participants. Specially, they were a convenience sample who attended this English workshop with the hope to improve their foreign language. That is, they voluntarily attended the workshop. Before starting the Crosstalk, in Mandarin Chinese, the researcher explained what the purpose of this study was to help them improve their English ability. Moreover, learners' role in this study was also clarified to ensure there was no misunderstanding afterwards.

The English language abilities of the participants were not assessed by formal methods, such as standard pen and paper tests. Since the research population was the convenient sample, their levels of English were subjectively assessed in the class.

### 2.2 Instrument

In this study, questionnaires and interviews as well as auditing journal were utilized. Furthermore, this study utilized the 5-point rating scale ranging from never, seldom, no comment, usually to always (see Appendix). Since this research tended to understand how much vocabulary and story content during Crosstalk do participants understand, each participant used his or her native language to speak (output), and listened in a language that they wanted to learn (input). They were using non--verbal communication techniques to convey meaning in the conversation. Learners guess, and apply their schemata to understand the context the teacher builds. That is, languages will be acquired through comprehensible input and not by the practice of output. In the initiative stage, learners were not forced to drill to speak in English. Instead, they listened before language acquisition naturally came to them.

### 2.3 Data Collection Procedure

In this study, research data were collected by questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and an observation journal to examine adult learners' attitudes after Crosstalk. In addition, story telling was implemented in the classroom.

After Crosstalk was demonstrated in the English class, students were interviewed in English by the researcher for about 15-20 minutes each. All the oral interviews followed the four phases suggested by Shohamy, namely warm-up, level-check, probes, and wind-up. The results of the study were collected after the data were analyzed. This study was conducted in an English workshop for about 6 weeks, with two hour duration per week. The participants were expected to speak in Mandarin Chinese only while telling their stories.

## 3. Results

### 3.1 Questionnaires

This study aimed to find out if adult learners enjoy English learning using Crosstalk, feel they gain benefit from the story-telling process, and perceive it as a good way to learn the target language. One of the questionnaire questions was, "Did you enjoy the Crosstalk session?" 94% of the responses were in the "always" and "usually" categories, indicating a high level of enjoyment.

Crosstalk develops the learner's innate ability to guess from context of the stories. In a traditional environment that learns language, guessing meaning is not often used though it is a justified strategy. During the process of guessing, verifying, and reasoning, levels of understanding increased. About 98 % of the subjects always guessed the meaning when crosstalked. Results of the questionnaires also showed that the majority of the participants became more actively guessing in the learning process before they could actually understand. However, still some felt impatient because spoken ability did not increase as fast as they expected.

Specially, about 82 % of the subjects understood vocabulary and overall story meaning. Significantly, almost everybody understood the foreign teachers who used body language and drew pictures to clarify the meaning of his speech. Crosstalk provided the comprehensible input in an authentic, natural, and understandable way.

### 3.2 Observations

Results of the observations among the subjects suggested that, during the process of drawing, gesturing, elements of TPR (total physical response), very high degrees of understanding, attention, and motivation were maintained in the conversation although both parties were speaking in their native languages.

One insight that the researcher found was that the mechanics of Crosstalk are by nature quite amusing. Using

actions, props, facial expressions, drawings to convey meaning is entertaining. Most subjects used a lot of drawings and actions when they crosstalked to one another.

Integrating the comprehensible inputs of Crosstalk communication into an ESL classroom, this researcher also found that listening comprehension, not the speaking itself, is the key to help adult language learners to become fluent speakers. That is, applying a non-verbal communication which conveys meaningful themes to improve learners' listening comprehension will ultimately help increase the learners' speaking proficiency.

## 3.3 Personal Feedbacks

Moreover, this study assessed language learners' feedbacks after Crosstalk communication was applied into the traditional learning environment. In the interviews, the researcher tended to know whether learners considered participation in Crosstalk is a good way to learn English. Findings showed that the majority subjects held the positive viewpoints to Crosstalk given that it helped increase confidence, motivation, and communicative skills in English.

The research hypothesis was that during the process of drawing, gesturing, elements of TPR, very high degrees of understanding, attention, and motivation were maintained in the conversation although both parties were speaking in their native languages. The subjects' responses and feedbacks conformed to the assumption.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1 Conclusions

This study concluded that as understanding increased, the need for non--verbal communication was lessened. Though language learning strategies have been testing for centuries, there is a tendency for English education to undervalue the listening skill. This paper proposed that listening comprehension, not the practice of speaking, is the key for the adult language learners to become fluent speakers. That is, languages are acquired through comprehensible input and not by the practice of output. In other words, how to teach, not when to teach, is the rationale. Moreover, the elderly learners, with metacognition as well as the prior knowledge, after an appropriate immersion of listening to the target language, fluent speaking ability will be

attained naturally.

Results of the questionnaires in this study showed that participants became more actively involved in the learning process, found it interesting before they could actually produce spoken English. In addition, observations and interviews with the subjects suggested that, during the process of drawing, gesturing, elements of TPR (total physical response), very high degrees of understanding, attention, and motivation were maintained in the conversation although both parties were speaking in their native languages.

Although most of the adult students' motivation was high, the limited contact and study time of this research need to be taken into account. This research suggested that, when teaching the older adult language learners, drawing, gesturing, and elements of TPR (total physical response) that help understanding should be integrated in the conversation although spoken language hasn't produced in a short period of time.

This study concluded that when teaching the elderly learners, as understanding increased, the need for non--verbal communication was lessened. In addition to the arrangement of the comfortable physical environment such as lighting, temperature, and acoustics, a language teacher should redefine the educational objectives for older adults.

### 4.2 Recommendations

This research may be significant in laying the groundwork for understanding the attitudes of the elderly ESL population in Taiwan. Therefore, more research should be made to discover natural approaches to a native-like mastery of a second language. Since Taiwan has become a country of an ageing population, the scarcity of organization and formal programs tailored for elder language learners makes bilingual teaching         difficult. Therefore, given the limited studies concerning the impact of ESL on older adults, investigation and research of this field should be encouraged and further expanded.    It is also suggested that a systematic and well-organized English program and the long-life learning policies in Taiwan be established so as to better language learning for adult language learners.

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# 運用「對談」幫助老齡學習者增進語言輸入的理解力

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## 摘　　要

　　本研究目的在探討一群高齡的學習者在英語學習過程中，對於聽的理解能力有多少的認知、並了解阻礙他們學習外語的原因有那些。雖然語言學習策略已有許多實驗測試的結果，但銀髮族之聽力影響其英語教育整體層面的研究，似乎是付之闕如。本研究的理論基礎依據美國克拉申教授的語言習得理論、及布朗博士創作的「對談」原理，亦即語言是由「可理解的語言輸入」，大量為學生製造接觸語言的機會，而不是在「學習」過程中學會用文法在大腦產生句型來練習語言。本文提出高齡者能說一口流利的英語的關鍵，在於聽力理解-即使是「用猜的」、而非口說練習本身。研究問卷、觀察、及面談結果顯示：運用「對談」來學習英語，經由繪圖、手勢、及肢體回應教學法，銀髮族將語言化為動作，聽力理解程度增高、學習壓力降低。是故，營造一個無壓力、具鼓勵性的、關懷的、以及能夠誘發高齡者學習動機的聽力學習環境，是語言教師最重要的教學策略之一。

**關鍵詞**：對談、可理解的語言輸入、後設認知、先前知識