Breathing: Neglected Pillar of Prosody and Body Language in Language Teaching

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Breathing is not merely the engine of all speech; by seasoning discourse with emotion and interpretive shades, it plays a key role in conferring authenticity to a message. As such, it is the more invisible alter ego of body language and operates in the shadow of prosody. While body language is culturally determined, breathing obeys laws that are unique to each language, whether verbal or nonverbal. For its interactive ability to generate speech, breathing deserves far more awareness among Foreign Language (FL) instructors. Examples that highlight the importance of "breathing" and suggestions as to ways to incorporate "breathing" in day-to-day FL teaching may stimulate the FL teacher to let these ideas find their way to the classroom.

外国語の教授において軽視されている韻律の柱呼吸は、会話に感情や様々な陰影で味をつけるという理由で、あらゆる話し言葉における原動力であるだけでなく、特に、メッセージに真実性を与える鍵である。つまり、呼吸はむしろボディランゲージの目に見えない分身であり、韻律の陰で作用していると言える。ボディランゲージが文化的に決定される一方、呼吸は、それぞれの言語に固有の法則に従っている。呼吸には真の発話を生成する相互作用力がある。したがって、外国語教師がより意識すべき要素である。呼吸の重要性を強調するいくつかの例と、日々の外国語教授に呼吸を組み込むためのいくつかの提案は、外国語教師にこれらのアイデアをクラスルームで実現する刺激となると思われる。

LIKE PROSODY, macro- and micro-body language, the art and importance of meaning-generating breathing in the speech production process, has been overlooked for far too long in foreign language (FL) teaching. I wish to take this opportunity to call for more attention to breathing in particular, as a gateway to authenticity and authority in the acquisition and production process of verbal FL communication.

Breathing and speech production are well documented in the pathological and clinical field, especially related to various forms of Broca's aphasia (Hixon, Weisman, & Hoit, 2008). One can also find ample information about the breathing-communication pair in specialized instruction works on opera singing, calligraphy, martial arts, and classic music playing. Breathing in relation to FL communication, however, is pretty much unchartered territory.

When a child is born, the doctor or midwife holds it up by its feet and slaps it on its bottom to get breathing started, and with it comes the first cry, the child's first communicative act. And that is about it for the rest of our lives. Unless we become opera singers, pianists or violinists, calligraphers, actors, athletes, yogi, lung or asthma patients, we rarely ever think about breathing, until our last.

Yet, as naturally as our breath propels syntactic and semantic units and the emotions associated with them into the revelation of our personality as a communicator when we use our mother tongue, breathing reveals itself all too often as an inefficient tool when grafted onto FL speech. Every language has its own breathing mantra, blended with a prosody and macro and micro body language designed by culture and individuality, the rules of which, only when mastered, convey authenticity and authority to any utterance.

This paper proposes that breathing, when producing speech in a FL, is more important than we think, even while we can intuitively appreciate its relevance. I also suggest a pragmatic approach to introducing breathing in the classroom.

"Ce qui se conçoit bien, s'énonce bien et les mots pour le dire viennent aisément"

In 1674, in his *L'Art Poétique,* Nicolas Boileau famously wrote, "What is well conceived can be stated clearly, and the words to say it come easily" (author's translation). Who would ever have thought his revelation of the obvious three centuries ago would be confirmed by progress in neurolinguistics and by evidence from tests on FL production!

What Boileau, we are left to guess, was not so familiar with, is that, beyond the acquisition of a communication tool—for instance a language—breathing is a key component in the generation and production of efficient and authentic communication.

"Don't forget about breathing!"

One may wonder why "breathing" is taught to practitioners of a great variety of instruments of communication, be they artists (piano, trumpet, violin, ballet, calligraphy, painting, singing, acting) or sportsmen (you just name the sport where breathing does not play a key role!) The reason is that, beyond all technique, learning how to breathe is the key to a harmonious and intimate relationship. Communication through art and sport can also be considered as a kind of second language, the techniques of expression of which we learn through sometimes years of practice. Why then do we neglect "breathing" when it comes to teaching a FL? Perhaps it is because we teachers consider it a negligible part of FL learning or assume that it must be the same as in our mother tongue. Or maybe it is because we are more concerned with the basics (grammar, syntax, vocabulary) and test results. It could, however, be that FL teachers, despite being great professionals in other ways, are not necessarily good actors and so overlook the importance of breathing.

Breathing is Essential to Confer Authenticity to the Messages That We Produce

Why is the right breathing so important when generating and producing discourse in a FL?

About 95% of speech (the rate appears to be slightly lower for female speakers, especially in Latin countries) is produced during breathing out (Hall, 1966, 1976) However, less well known is the cardinal role of breathing in the build-up of pre-speech messages.

Whether we initiate a communication sequence or step into a communication process generated by another party, the breathing process that will help produce a message, starts at the complex pre-speech level that consists mainly of the following steps:

- collection and processing of all present VAKOG (Visual, Auditive, Kinesthetic, Olfactive and Gustative – a common concept in Neuro-Linguistic Programming) data in the brain as a preparation for an intended communicational act;
- conception of the message (verbal or nonverbal or both) in the brain through selection of vocabulary, sentence type,

linguistic register, assorted macro- and micro-body language (the former conscious, the latter unconscious, etc.);

- allotting bits of air to each constituent group of words that compose the intended verbal message;
- planning in the brain which VAKOG tools will be most appropriate to convey the message;
- selection of appropriate registers in the VAKOG toolbox (eg.,Visual: killing look, conciliatory look, "don't-know-what-you're-talking-about" look, etc.);
- scanning of the communicational environment in which we plan to operate, allowing for short notice message adjustments, both at pre-speech and speech production level;
- coating of the intended pre-speech message with VAKOG theatricals–communicating is acting--that will render authenticity to the speech production and generate various degrees of self-assertiveness during the actual speech act (Bandler & Grinder, 1990).

This decision-making process happens mostly in fractions of seconds, but requires a sizable part of the oxygen we scoop in to energize these pre-speech steps, before we even reach the stage of actual speech production. Consequently, when one moves to the speech production stage, more of the same "air-scoop" is needed to operate the selected communicational tools (vocal box, solicited body parts, kinesthetic actions, such as sweating or trembling, blinking with the eyes, blushing) while storing extra air needed for extra-communicational alertness, and readiness for sudden unanticipated twists in the communication flow about to be established.

This complex process means that we have to learn to scoop up the right amount of air to go successfully through the whole pre-speech to speech production cycle and learn how to distribute available airflow over the various stages of speech production in such a way that authenticity during speech production does not suffer from over-investment of air in the pre-speech process.

"Breathing Synchronization": A Marker of Trust

As has been long established, among others (Casse, 1980; Bandler & Grinder, 1990), through Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP) research, calibration –scanning the communicational settings of your interlocutor and ensuing synchronizing of breathing during a communicative interaction--is an essential marker of the gradual establishment of a relationship of trust between interlocutors.

It seems reasonable to suppose that such calibration and synchronization would occur at some point during communication between healthy speakers with a different mother tongue. This constitutes an additional incentive for FL teachers to grow more aware of the importance of breathing.

Breathing in Our Mother Tongue

In our mother tongue, and when on familiar communicational grounds, this pre-speech preparation requires much less time and less oxygen, as most of the constituting elements have reached a certain level of automation, thus leaving more "air-scoop" available for speech- and accompanying body-language production quality.

That extra air, available for speech production (the actual utterance), is one of the reasons why we sound more authentic in our mother tongue.

In a way, we could look at this pre-speech to speech process (from message conception to utterance) in terms of oxygen redistribution; the more air required for the pre-speech conception process, the less of the same scoop of air is available for speech output. Or, put otherwise, the longer we need to put our

message together before speech, the less breath luxury is left for the actual speech production.

Breathing in a FL

It therefore makes sense that, when using an FL with a foreign interlocutor in a foreign environment, the pre-speech part of a communicational act will require more air, hence more frequent or deeper air scoops: there are less speech automatisms available, selection of vocabulary, socially appropriate registers, grammar and syntax, and the emotional coating, necessary to adjust to the foreign interlocutor's receptiveness, requires more time, hence air. This is not to mention the oxygen and time needed to process the incoming message in FL and the programming of voice box and body language in the first place.

That prolonged pre-speech process, of course, leaves less oxygen (for a single air-scoop) available for the actual speech (verbal and non-verbal) production. Hence, the occurrence of silences, pauses, hesitations, staring, hums, *ohs*, and *wells*, self-interruptions, unfinished sentences and the like, accompanied by an erratic, multiple breathing pattern.

Also, the relative absence of "cultural communality" between speakers of different mother tongues constitutes a challenge for breathing synchronization, hence for the establishment of a relationship of trust.

Try it out for Yourself!

While the breathing-speech production connection has been the object of quite some research in the pathological field (Lassus, 1992; Watzlawick, 1993), funding to allow more research into this field in a controlled, pluri-disciplinary setting would be welcome, as it is not yet a priority for public or private sponsors.

Yet, the skeptical reader may wish to try it out for her/himself in the following three experiments. I have conducted them on multiple occasions with various Japanese and Western participants, most recently with Shinshu JALT members, JALT November 2011 Tokyo Conference participants, and university and private students, primarily from a pragmatic point of view rather than on a purely scientific and statistically controlled basis.

My personal background in the fields of theater, opera, Chinese martial arts and conference interpreting have sharpened my alertness to the key role of breathing and left me wondering why such breathing techniques are not commonly applied to FL learning.

After initial breathing experiments with small group NLP students at the INALCO, the Sorbonne Faculty of Far-Eastern languages, Paris, and interns of FAFIH, the French Federation of the Hotel Industry (Paris), I introduced breathing and synchronization techniques to FL learners after joining Shinshu University in 1992. Since then, breathing training has become an integral part of my FL training programs.

Experiment 1: "How Far Can You Count?"

For the first step of this experiment, participants were instructed to inhale as deeply as they could, then immediately start counting from one until they could no longer hold their breath. Participants were asked to write down the final number.

For the second step, participants were asked to repeat the previous exercise, but now counting as far as far as possible in their best foreign language and again write down the final number.

For step three, participants were asked to compare the results of steps one and two and reflect on how the discrepancy in results, almost always in favor of their mother tongue, could be explained.

Experiment 2: "Meet My Family!"

First, participants were asked to write down the number of their family members, including nuclear, extended family and family in-law in order of importance.

Next, the participants were invited to take as deep a scoop of air as they could and then immediately start naming all their family members with their respective rank (e.g.,. John, my dad, Mary, my mom, Peter, my older brother, etc.), while counting on their fingers or having a partner count for them, and then write down the total number of members listed.

For step three, participants were asked to do the same in their best foreign language, without translating the family member terms, and then write down the total.

For the fourth step, participants were invited to compare the results and reflect on how the discrepancy in results, most likely in favor of their mother tongue, could be explained.

Experiment 3: Comparative Phraseology.

For the first step, participants were asked to read, then pronounce, in a natural way, the following example sentence and count (or have a partner count) the number of breath scoops they needed: "It takes 20 hours by plane to fly from Tokyo, Narita airport to JFK in New York."

For the second step, participants were asked to invite a Japanese colleague or friend to do the same in Japanese: "*Tokyo no Narita kuukou kara Nyu Yooku no JFK kuukou made hikouki de nijuu jikan kakaru*" or "東京の成田空港からニューヨークのＪＦＫ空港まで飛行機で２０時間かかる. »

For the third step participants were asked to reverse languages and go over the test sentence again, while counting the number of breath scoops.

For step four, participants had to compare the number of air scoops with their partner and reflect on how the discrepancy could be explained.

Experimental Findings

Experiment 1

None of the subjects, whether Japanese or foreigners with a variety of best second languages, could beat their mother tongue score, when counting in their second language. Even those subjects considered perfectly bilingual showed a count deficit in their second language.

Although the length of the numerals in some languages (for example French *quatre-vingt dix-huit* for ninety-eight) might cause a distortion (extra air consumption), native French participants still did better in their mother tongue than in English, German or Dutch.

While more scientific research in the matter may be necessary, it may be assumed that the counting experiment in a foreign language consumed more of a scoop of air (up to 30% for near-perfect bilingual subjects) during the pre-speech process, leaving less air available to speech production.

Experiment 2

Again production in the mother tongue scored highest. Only the discrepancies between mother tongue and FL were much wider than in experiment one, which we suspect might be attributed to the extra pre-speech processing complexity of generating "simultaneous bi-lingual speech" (*otoosan*, John, *okaasan*, Mary, etc.). More research would be welcome.

Experiment 3

Where a native English speaker would utter the sentence within one smooth breath, the native Japanese speaker would need three or four to sound natural in English. The other way around, most participants sounded unnatural, as they seemed to superpose their natural breathing pattern over a FL, the structure of which commands different breathing patterns in order to sound authentic.

Possible Applications in the Classroom

The following few suggestions might help teachers and students:

1. Raise self-awareness and awareness among fellow teachers and students about their natural breathing patterns during speech production. Teachers can show their breathing pattern clearly during speech production and have students practice likewise, first with translated messages in their mother tongue, then in the FL. Use of a metronome is convincing and brings a light-hearted touch to the exercise.
2. Apply each other's breathing patterns to your own speech production and point out the loss of authenticity of the message. For example: a native English speaker utters a given statement (for example in English and Japanese) using alternately native, then Japanese breathing pattern. Let the students experiment likewise.
3. Listen to and watch your favorite vocal performers (singers, actors, politicians, televangelists, news anchors, etc.) and notice how their breathing carries the message and prosody, and supports the accompanying body language.
4. Invite students to practice "shadow talk" with their teacher or their favorite vocal performer, while paying specific attention to their interlocutor's breathing and trying to synchronize with their breathing pattern. Such exercise, very common among apprentice conference interpreters enhances "cultural communality", communicative authenticity and facilitates the creation of a relationship of trust
5. Point out the striking parallel between "fuel efficiency" (for example, for cars, you go slower but travel farther) and "air efficiency" in speech generation and speech production--an optimal balance of air redistribution between both produces more authentic speech.
6. Allow for students, engaged in FL verbal communication, to take their time before producing any speech, so they can dosage their air supply equally over pre-speech and speech production sequences. Do not neglect to tell them to always reserve some extra air for the accompanying body language, observation of the communicational environment and reactivity to unexpected twists in the conversation.
7. Teach students how they can use a single scoop of air more efficiently by working on the use of the diaphragm, the glottal stop, a more economical use of the voice box tools, while they concentrate on the fluidity of the message.
8. Remind students that fluidity of speech should not be sacrificed on the altar of 100% grammatical and syntactic correctness. And that only through the acquisition of speech automatisms in the FL will they sound genuine and convincing.
9. Teach students that, in addition to the acquisition of the traditional FL basics, breathing correctly can narrow the gap between what one wants to say and what one can say.

Conclusion

While all native and FL speakers rely on breathing when processing and producing speech, FL teachers should realize that until a foreign student masters an FL adequately, attention is

needed to promote the right balance of breathing. This attention, which would otherwise be devoted to the speech production part in the native language, with a (consequently) greater degree of message authenticity is needed at the pre-speech generation part for FL speakers. That results in a loss of degree of message authenticity—literally "by lack of air".

Likewise, FL teachers might pay more attention to the fact that body-language and culturally determined, hence appropriate verbal and non-verbal message coatings, require extra air inflow for FL students to process and then produce an authentic message.

As in all other forms of communication mentioned above, appropriate breathing is the key to delivering an authentic message and generating a relationship of trust. Therefore its dynamics should not be ignored when we endeavor to help foreign students sound and become authentic in our mother tongue.

To the open-minded reader, even if unfamiliar with this approach, I might suggest: "Take a deep breath (not a sigh) before going to your next language class!"

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