

# **1 An Investigation Into How Silent Wait-Time Assists Language Learning**

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## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Within the broader area of study known as classroom discourse, one area that has been the subject of much attention is that of silent wait-time. The aim of this study is to investigate whether silent wait-time assists language learning. I will also examine the value of wait-time as a strategy in improving the quality of learners' oral performance.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

Through experience I have established a number of principles which are fundamental to my teaching. One that I believe enhances my learners' language development is allowing them enough wait-time to respond after my questions. This research was motivated by my interest in finding out whether my assumptions about wait-time were justified.

## **3 WAIT-TIME**

### **3.1 Definition of Wait-Time**

Wait time is a silent pause between the teacher's initiation and learners' response (Tobin 1987). The teacher's initiation could be a question to be answered or a task for the learners to accomplish. Thornbury (1996: 282) defines wait time as "...the time teachers allow students to answer questions, before, for example, asking another student, rephrasing the question, or even answering their own question themselves".

### **3.2 Benefits of Wait-Time**

After analyzing hundreds of tape recordings of classroom discourse, Rowe (1986) noticed that the average wait-time is a second or less but that when this was increased to three or more seconds a variety of significant improvements in learners' performance emerged:

- The length of the learners' responses increases.
- The correctness of the learners' responses increases.
- No answer response decreases.
- The numbers of volunteered learners greatly increase.
- Learners' initiation increases.

Similar findings have emerged from studies of wait-time in language learning contexts (Nunan 1998).

Wait-time is particularly beneficial when learners require time to make sense of and respond to the demands of complex questions (Brown & Wragg 1993). In language learning contexts, Met (1994: 174) highlights the value of wait-time for learners who may know the content of the answer but who need extra time to articulate their response. Another benefit of wait-time is that it allows teachers to show their interest in their learners' response (Hayes 1998).

## **4 METHOD**

This study is an evaluation of a strategy used in the classroom; it is an evaluative research approach (Nunan 1992). This research evaluated the effect of wait-time on my learners' performance in English classrooms. More specifically, it aimed to assess the effect of wait-time of about 30 seconds on the quality of my learners' performance during complex speaking tasks (a description task, a narration task and a role play dialogue).

### **4.1 Research Questions**

The investigation focused on these specific questions:

1. When I give 30 seconds wait-time do more slow learners volunteer to participate?
2. What are the characteristics of my learners' language when I give them about 30 seconds wait-time?

### **4.2 Data Collection**

The data were collected in a General Education elementary school. The learners were in Grade 4, in their first year of learning English. They were all girls aged 9 to 10 and there were 45 mixed-ability learners in each class. Data were collected through peer observation and audio recording. I discuss each of these in turn below.

#### **4.2.1 Peer Observation**

A colleague observed three lessons that I taught and collected information about the participation of learners using an observation sheet which I prepared and discussed with the colleague in advance. The sheet contained a seating plan for ten learners, seven of whom were considered slow. The observer was asked to indicate with a tick on the seating plan each time one of these learners volunteered to participate during a task. A red tick was used when the participation occurred when no wait-time (1-2 seconds) was provided; a blue tick when participation followed wait-time (about 30 seconds).

#### **4.2.2 Audio Recording**

Three further lessons were recorded. Each contained a different speaking task conducted twice. The three tasks were:

1. The learners are asked to give some personal details using a sample pattern from their book.
2. The learners' are asked to role play a shopping dialogue.
3. The learners retell events of a story.

Each of these tasks was first presented by the teacher and immediate responses were requested from the learners. Then the learners were asked to respond to the same tasks but a silent pause of 30 seconds preceded the responses. During this wait-time the teacher asked the learners to focus and think about what to say. The tasks were transcribed.

## 5 FINDINGS

### 5.1 Effect of Wait-time on Quantity of Learners' Participation

The peer observation generated data about the participation of the learners in tasks with and without wait-time. The responses for all the tasks indicated that for tasks with wait-time, learners volunteered to participate 61 times while in tasks without wait-time learners volunteered to participate 42 times.

Figure 1 presents each learner's (P1-P10) participation in a total of 18 tasks, nine with wait-time and nine without. This figure indicates that participation generally increased when more wait-time was provided. P4 is an exception here; another interesting case is P9 who never put up her hand in any of the tasks (but see below for a comment on this).

These quantitative data provide a positive view of the value of allowing appropriate wait-time for the learners to think and improve their participation in the foreign language classroom.

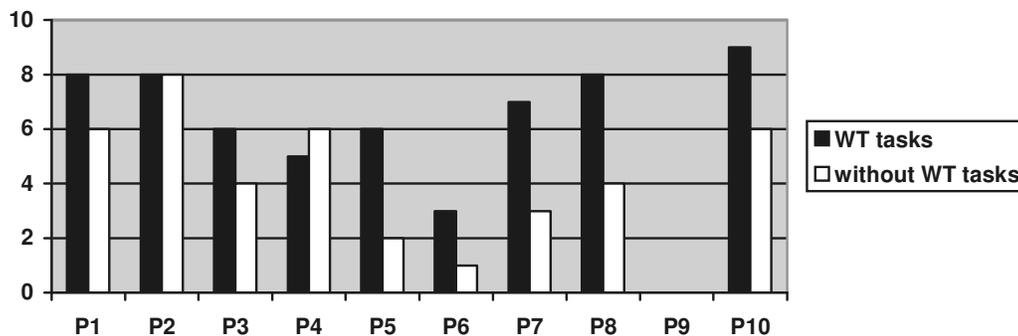


Figure 1: Learner participation in tasks

### 5.2 Effect of Wait-Time on Quality of Learners' Responses

Transcripts of learners' responses to specific tasks during the three lessons were analyzed to estimate the quality of their performance, both in tasks with and without wait-time. When analyzing the responses of both tasks it was noticed that some language features appeared in the wait-time tasks.

### 5.2.1 *Word Finding*

This is the ability of the learners to find words to suit the context. In the transcripts, learners' responses in tasks with wait-time were more varied in selecting words for different contexts. In contrast, in the responses in tasks without wait-time the learners followed the same model provided in their book. For example, in task 1 (giving a personal description) the learners initially tended to use the same pattern of description:

*"I am (name). I am (age). I am a learner.  
I like (food or hobby). I live in (town)."*

But when they were given wait-time to think, they used a greater variety of words. For example, one learner used the word 'love' instead of 'like', which was provided in the model, even though the word 'love' had not been mentioned in the lesson.

Overall, there was evidence in the data that learners' responses changed into more varied ones when they had more time to think.

### 5.2.2 *Creative Construction of Language*

Increasing wait-time also allowed learners to create their own language structures to convey meaning. This is not a matter of simply substituting words but of forming whole new structures.

For example, one learner said *"I like a doctor"*. This learner tried to create a sentence to convey her ambition 'to be a doctor' as one of her personal details. Although this sentence is grammatically wrong, this could be evidence that wait-time might encourage creative ideas beyond the structures provided.

### 5.2.3 *Longer Responses*

Finally, the responses which followed wait-time were generally longer than those produced when wait-time was not provided. For example, in the first lesson, for tasks without wait-time, learners produced 3 to 5 sentences to describe themselves, exactly as the model provided in the book. But when wait-time of 30 seconds was given the learners produced from 8 to 11 sentences.

In summary then, the use of wait-time seemed to have some impact on the quality of the language produced by the learners in terms of their word finding, creative use of language, and length of response.

## 6 DISCUSSION

### 6.1 *Increasing Learners' Participation*

The findings suggest that wait-time positively influenced learners' willingness to participate in lessons. Most of the slow learners, who usually do not feel confident using English in front of their peers, seemed to use wait-time as a silent language trial period. Of course, we cannot conclude that raising hands is an indication of whether the learners know the answers; P9, who we

mentioned earlier, never raised her hand, but, when asked to complete the tasks individually by the teacher during the lesson, showed that she was able to. This particular learner was somewhat shy, which accounts at least partly for her lack of participation during lessons.

## 6.2 Increasing the Quality of Learners' Responses

The overall finding here is that the learners' responses for the tasks with wait-time were often more confident, more correct, and longer.

Rowe (1986: 44) indicates that with only one second wait-time "responses tend to consist of short phrases". In this study, increasing wait-time resulted in longer responses produced by the learners; for example in the description task they expanded the sentences to include extra information about their family, ambitions and feelings. But, as mentioned earlier, the tasks without wait-time consisted of short isolated phrases similar to the model in learners' books.

This comparison between the learners' performance in tasks with wait-time and in tasks without wait-time indicates that increasing wait-time encourages learners to think more, restructure forms, and activate their schematic knowledge. Activating the schematic knowledge permits learners to find more suitable words to use in particular contexts.

## 6.3 Limitations

Some points to consider in weighing up these findings are the following:

- In one of the observed lessons learners were distracted because they knew they were going on a school trip that day. This may have affected the extent to which they responded during lessons.
- If a colleague is involved in collecting observational data, care must be taken to brief them in detail about the procedures they are being asked to follow. For example, they need to know what counts as evidence of participation and when they should be making a note of this.
- This study has focused on one type of wait-time. A number of others exist, as highlighted by Tobin (1987).

## 7 CONCLUSION

This study has further increased my awareness of the effects that wait-time can have on learners. Allowing appropriate wait-time for the learners in language classes can, I believe, support the language learning process. Comparisons of learners' performance with limited and extended wait-time revealed differences in both the quantity and quality of their language. Time is a significant tool that can be used effectively for the benefit of all learners and teachers. If teachers share some of their talking time with their learners as a silent time for them to think and perform better they probably *will* perform better.

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