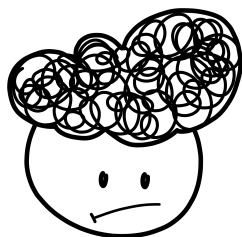


Language Overload and How to help Your Learner Manage It

May is mental health awareness month. In connection to that, I would like to raise a topic of **language overload** by sharing my personal story, our students' examples and by giving some tips on how to mitigate language overload to create a safer and more balanced learning environment.

My story

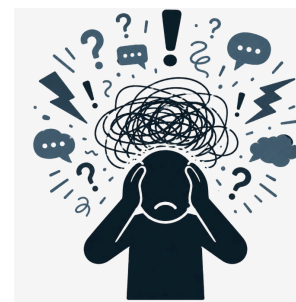
I was raised in the Soviet Union and spoke only Russian during my growing years. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, my parents were forced to leave Russia to seek income and safety. So, we moved to Mongolia. I did not experience any language or culture overload at that time. We lived in a city built by Russians. I attended a Russian high school. It turned out that due to Russian influence most Mongolians understood and spoke Russian. After high school I started learning English at a local college. My exposure to English was naturally dosed. There were simply not enough Peace Corps Volunteers or Christian missionaries to give me English overdose. However, when I came to Canada at 23, I had a huge culture shock - English literally struck me on the head: it was too much to the extent that it was interfering with my Russian, and I no longer knew what was happening in my brain. My languages were fighting. After a few years things got better and I found some peace and balance in being bilingual ... until the next move!



The next move happened to the USA after many years. I am very culture sensitive so even changing English to English within the context of a different country/culture created a very distinct overload. Sometimes we are not aware of what we are struggling with and can hardly name it.

Our students

I have one student in the Academic English class whose language overload is so prominent that sometimes she has difficulties saying absolutely anything even though she knows a lot of words and structures in English. She simply gets frozen, holds her head in her hands and shows many many deep emotions. "Teacher, it's frustrating", is all she can say. Another student in a conversation class gets tired, slows down and starts making more mistakes after about half an hour of English exposure. Her maximum seems to be this half an hour. After that her brain says: *I need a break*.



What is language overload?

In psycholinguistics the concept of "linguistic overloading" (i.e. language or communicative overload) was first explored by British linguist David Crystal. He introduced this concept in 1987, and defined language overload as *the cognitive and communicative strain that occurs when the demands of processing language exceed the brain's limited working memory and processing capacity*. This concept helps explain how language learners struggle when forced to process too many linguistic elements simultaneously. Today, this idea is closely tied to

Cognitive Load Theory in psycholinguistics and instructional design. In many instances, language overload is a part of immediate or delayed culture shock which makes it an even more complex phenomena.

How can we recognize language overload?

When any system goes into overdrive, things get confusing, messy and escalated. You will see your student freeze when trying to think or speak (decreased language production and performance) or be emotionally and mentally disturbed (frustration, anxiety, embarrassment, withdrawal, nervous laughter, avoidance). The routines that once were doable become too much (visible cognitive fatigue). The student would switch to translation much more often to shift between languages.

What causes it and how to mitigate it?

In my opinion, whether one experiences it or not depends on each individual's nervous system so we never know who can get affected and to what extent. What can we do to mitigate it?

Possible Causes of Language Overload	Effective Mitigation Tips
Excessive teacher talk, rapid speech	Use instructional pacing, slow down, make pauses
Dense academic tasks	Chunk instruction
Unfamiliar cultural references	Activate prior knowledge/ familiar cultural situations
Insufficient processing time	Allow processing time
No visual/contextual support	Use visual and context anchors
Culture shock, emotional stress or physical fatigue	Use breaks, predictable routines and all the above

Final Thoughts

Adult learners are often cognitively exhausted before the class even starts. Many are working physically demanding jobs, raising children, dealing with immigration stress and functioning in survival mode. The overload that you observe might not be only linguistic, but a cumulative cognitive overload. That really changes how we define “motivation”, “participation” and “presence”.

References

Crystal D.(1987). Linguistic overloading - normal and abnormal. *First Language*.
Medical College of Wisconsin. Cognitive Load Theory: A Guide to Applying Cognitive Load Theory to Your Teaching. Retrieved from [here](#)

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