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## ***Use It or Lose It: How Speaking Keeps a Language Alive***

**The importance of speaking/producing language on a regular basis.** That line isn't just a principle—it's the whole plot of this article.

In this article I am going to talk about my Latin American friend's relationship with Spanish. To protect their identity, I will refer to them using the fictional name "Maya" and use the gender neutral pronouns "they/them." Maya spent the first 6 years of their life in their home country and moved to the US after. They used to be able to speak Spanish fluently and even went to their home country during many summers. However, in the years after moving to the US their daily usage of the language dropped almost to zero. Spanish was spoken in their household, but they began responding in English. Today, they have a very unique relationship with the language. They can understand almost everything I say in conversation, but practically cannot speak.

That comprehension-production gap is the point. Understanding floods in through listening and reading; **speaking** is a different muscle—motor planning, real-time retrieval, morphology on the fly, and managing anxiety. Muscles you don't use end up atrophying. Even native speakers can lose fluency if they stop **producing** altogether for long stretches; with L2 speakers the effects of not speaking show up even faster. Production is how you consolidate form-meaning mappings under pressure and build automaticity. No amount of passive exposure can substitute for the workout of opening your mouth and reaching for words.

The importance of speaking is especially applicable for L2 learners as it is the only way to achieve a certain level of conversational fluency. And it is a perpetual process of upkeep and maintenance. I have personally experienced the importance of speaking the language at least for a couple hours every week. I achieved conversational fluency in both Spanish and French through my study abroad language immersion programs in 2022 and 2024 respectively. I manage to maintain almost the same level while I am in the US as I have sought out conversation partners and other language speaking opportunities on campus. However, during both summers following my study abroads, I went back home to Kolkata, India, where I did not speak any Spanish or French for nearly 3 consecutive months. This was due the fact that I only get exposure to Bengali (my regional language) for a few months every year, so I try to focus all my language immersion efforts on Bengali. My connection with the language and culture holds great personal meaning for me, and I hope to never lose it. The effects of this trade-off, however, were beyond evident both times by the time I got back to the US—a diminished vocabulary, slower construction of sentences, and a rusty accent.

Coming back to Maya's situation, they pick up speaking Spanish more in Colombia when they are in the environment where they must speak it, but almost never speak it while in the US. They say that since they are a fluent speaker of English, it's almost as if they cannot get themselves to speak Spanish in the US. They feel like people judge their accent or find it curious that they are Latin American and don't speak the language, while those in their home country celebrate them trying to speak. This highlights the importance of affective factors (the emotional and psychological aspects of language learning) in addition to the language production aspect. Affect is understudied and usually not taught too much in detail, even though it is a big factor in Language Acquisition, especially for L2 learners.

To make that comprehension-production gap concrete, here's a short list of **Spanish words that don't sound like their English counterparts**. Maya understood every one of these when I used them in context—but **speaking them back felt out of reach**. That's production in a nutshell.

- **desarrollar** — “day-sah-roh-YAR” (/desaro'jar/) → *to develop*
- **aprovechar** — “ah-pro-veh-CHAR” (/aproβe'tʃar/) → *to make good use of*
- **estrenar** — “es-treh-NAR” (/estre'nar/) → *to debut; wear/use for the first time*
- **darse cuenta** — “DAR-seh KWEEN-tah” (/darse'kwenta/) → *to realize*
- **fijarse** — “fee-HAR-seh” (/fi'xarse/) → *to notice; pay attention*
- **enredarse** — “en-ray-DAR-seh” (/enre'darse/) → *to get tangled; get involved*
- **averiguar** — “ah-veh-ree-GWAR” (/aβeri'ywar/) → *to find out*
- **menester** — “meh-nes-TAIR” (/menes'ter/) → *need; necessity (formal)*
- **sobremesa** — “so-breh-MAY-sah” (/soβre'mesa/) → *post-meal table talk*
- **fallecer** — “fah-ye-SEHR” (/faje'ser/) → *to pass away*
- **otorgar** — “oh-tor-GAR” (/otor'yar/) → *to grant/award*
- **desempeñarse** — “deh-sem-pehn-YAR-seh” (/desempe'jarse/) → *to perform (a role)*
- **quejarse** — “keh-HAR-seh” (/ke'xarse/) → *to complain*
- **despegar** — “des-peh-GAR” (/despe'yar/) → *to take off (plane); to unstick*
- **caprichoso** — “kah-pree-CHO-soh” (/kapri'tfoso/) → *whimsical;*

Her instant comprehension of these words—paired with the difficulty of **producing** them under social pressure—drives home the lesson: **you can't truly own a language until you use it out loud, regularly, with people**. That's where confidence grows, grammar stabilizes, and vocabulary becomes reflex instead of recall.

### Practical takeaways (what actually works):

- **Schedule speaking, not just study.** A couple hours a week (even 1 is better than nothing) of real conversation—tandems, meetups, phone calls—beats ten hours of silent apps.
- **Make it low-stakes.** Find partners who welcome mixed codes and repairs; lowering affective load leads to more output.
- **Rotate domains.** Talk about news one week, family the next, then hobbies; breadth prevents “islands” of fluency.
- **Track outages.** If you go months without producing (e.g. my Kolkata summers), plan a “re-entry” week of daily 20-minute calls to wake the system back up.
- **Celebrate imperfect speech.** The goal of production is communication first, polish second. Don't dwell on the mistakes you make. Celebration the milestones you achieve.

Languages are living entities. Comprehension lays the foundation; **production keeps the house standing**. Maya's story shows how quickly speech can slip when it isn't used—and how quickly it rebounds in Colombia when the environment nudges output and celebrates effort. If you're learning an Second Language, protect your speaking time like a workout schedule: little and often wins. If you teach or mentor learners, measure progress not only by how much they understand, but by how much they say as well.