A little production practice provides a big boost in language learning.

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Language production practice provides a stronger grammar and vocabulary learning experience than language comprehension practice (Hopman & MacDonald, 2018). Unlike in typical classroom environments, learners in that study received either only comprehension exercises or only production exercises. Here we investigate the learning benefits of language production in a more realistic setting in which learners get mostly comprehension practice and only a little production practice.

As in Hopman & MacDonald’s study, English speaking participants learned a 20-word artificial language that described a cartoon world in 7-word sentences. Four word types ended in suffixes agreeing in number and gender. Participants learned this language through interleaved passive exposure and active learning blocks. In active comprehension trials, learners made a match-mismatch judgment on an auditory phrase and an accompanying picture. In active production trials, learners were asked to describe pictures aloud in the novel language. We trained 104 participants in a new Mixed-Experience condition and compared their rates of learning and comprehension to that of participants from Comprehension-Only and Production-Only training conditions (208 participants total). The Mixed-Experience condition was identical to the original Comprehension-Only condition, except that 1 trial in each active comprehension block was replaced with a production trial, affecting approximately 17% of learning trials.

After learning, participants completed speech-picture matching tests to assess understanding of grammatical agreement markers and a grammatical judgment test to assess understanding of agreement rules. Although the Mixed-Experience condition differed from the Comprehension-Only condition in only about 1/6 th of the learning trials, the Mixed-Experience participants significantly outperformed Comprehension-Only participants on tests of comprehension. These results show that even a small amount of production practice provides strong learning and comprehension benefits compared to a comprehension-only curriculum. We will discuss potential mechanisms for this effect and implications for language learning.