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## **PSYCHOLINGUISTIC BENEFITS OF ASYNCHRONOUS APPROACH TO DISTANT LEARNING AMID HEIGHTENED SOCIAL ANXIETY AND ISOLATION. A GESTALT-DIALECTICAL PERSPECTIVE**

*Maksim A. Sokolov  
MPhil,*

*Modern languages and professional communication department  
Samara National Research University  
34 Moskovskoye shosse, Samara, 443086, Russia  
mr.maksim.sokolov@gmail.com*

**Abstract.** *The ongoing COVID-19 epidemic has exerted numerous effects on private and professional lives alike. In particular, sociological and psychological studies show detrimental effects in terms of anxiety. With respect to teaching English, it is taking place almost exclusively in online spaces, which may also cause anxiety or*

*contribute to it, especially for those who use such technology for the first time. All this comes as a double blow to classes with speech production difficulties, as anxiety negatively influences confidence. However, there still seems to be a way forward, which has shown its efficiency and which relies on the use of Gestalt-dialectical approach to analyzing the roots of the problem. The purpose of the article is to share author's experience for a particular class underpinned by relevant theory. The results of the study may be useful to teachers and students who are dealing with speech production issues.*

**Key words:** *Gestalt, Psycholinguistics, speech production, dialectics, dialectical philosophy*

### **1 Background and motivation**

The ongoing COVID-19 epidemic has exerted numerous effects on private and professional lives alike [1,2]. Speaking of TEFL from an organizational perspective lockdowns and social distancing measures transferred language classes entirely to online spaces [3]. However, there is also another, “inner” dimension of change in social interaction that belongs to the realm of social psychology and which has had its effect on TEFL from a psycholinguistic perspective. The phenomenon being referred to is increased anxiety, evidently caused by such socio-environmental factors as uncertainty, fear, inability of some individuals’ psyche to efficiently accommodate rapid changes in life [4, 5].

Another potential factor negatively affecting communication is the confluence of the above-mentioned overall social anxiety with the less visible distrust of online communication due to suspicions of privacy violations, recordings, monitoring by apps and technology. A concern that has been increasing its grasp of worldwide public awareness for quite some time now is about the devices and applications ‘spying on us’ [6]. It is evident that the combination of those two anxieties does not equiptechnology-using learners with confidence – be it general social or specific L2 speech production confidence – especially if students are already in grips of their fear of speaking. As the latter case was the case at hand, it seemed impossible for the situation to not be exacerbated. That it turned out the other way round may not only be deemed remarkable and potentially worth sharing, but also in many ways attributable to the Gestalt-dialectical analysis and corresponding action discussed in this article.

## **2 Peculiarities of a particular case**

The author considers the effect of switching from offline to online learning for an EFL class of 8 female native Russian-speaking university students aged 18-20 that had had issues with speech production confidence before the transition. It had been observed over the course of 5 months of weekly meetings that the majority of students in the class would still struggle with oral communication despite considerable progress reflected by written tests. Sufficient knowledge of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation would not guarantee a confident response to a question either by a teacher or another student, even if the response included a single word, yet alone a phrase or a sentence. The voice accompanying such stilted speech production would be exceptionally quiet and display a tremble which is characteristic of extreme shyness and/or the fear of making a mistake. The described phenomenon clouded students' otherwise working command of the English language that would have been sufficient for the majority of social situations. There was further indication (apart from the testing) that it was mainly the lack of confidence rather than the lack of knowledge or ability that was impeding their English-speaking skills. Namely, various creative writing tasks were accomplished swiftly and accurately, and subsequent reading out was affected by the issues only mildly. It is also worth noting that even when known/learnt set phrases were provided for the use in dialogues (thereby effectively reducing the possibility of error or embarrassment to a significant extent) student weren't sufficiently confident in oral communication and the activity still caused a good deal of anxiety.

Additionally, one should mention that the minority of students did show decent speaking skills, but their skills were perceived as daunting and unattainable by the majority and this profound contrast of ability seemed to have been negatively affecting both the confidence and speech production quality of less able students. The above assumption could be justified through observing detrimental effects in terms of speech production for less able students when they were asked to speak right after the more able ones.

In the view of peculiarities of a given case, the author was faced with what seemed to be an impossible task: to work with the class in question in a novel (and therefore potentially lowering one's confidence) online setting amid heightened overall anxiety and

isolation. However, contrary to the expectations, a carefully planned structure of the lesson developed according to Gestalt-dialectical principles not only smoothed the transition to online learning but actually contributed to a salient improvement in students' speaking skills. What follows describes the successful application of a Gestalt-dialectical method as well as provides theoretical background for the approaches involved in the study.

### **3 Uncovering similarities in the roots of various social anxieties – including fears associated with L2 speech production**

Since L2 speech production similarly to any speech production has an addressee apart from an addresser (even when a monologue is being rehearsed, in which case an addressor and an addressee basically coincide), it is fundamentally *communicative* (see also [7] for further discussion). This fact puts speech production in social context – either real or projected – by its very nature. Hence the input of social psychology can be invaluable in terms of developing solutions to the problems of L2 speech production. The approach taken here draws primarily (although in no way exclusively) on the intersection of the insights from social-cognitive theory, gestalt psychology and dialectical philosophy.

Social-cognitive theory of social psychology developed by professor Bandura maintains that “individuals possess self-beliefs that enable them to exercise a measure of control over their thoughts, feelings and action” [9, 10]. Then, what is deemed central to people's actions is “their judgements of their own ability to deal with different situations”. The judgements are thought to arise from 4 sources: performance attainments, observation of other people; verbal persuasion; physiological states. Those judgements determine individuals' effort, persistence and resilience [10].

*Judgement* by definition involves a judging subject and a subject being judged (see also [17]) – either real or projected – which makes judgment a communicative situation akin to speech production, but may be additionally interpreted as a *response* to the original communicative situation of speech production or difficulties with it, the goal of that response being – for an individuals' psyche – to complete the Gestalt. The latter interpretation is in line with Gestalt theory views on experience as ‘an instinctual cycle that seeks to *complete* itself [11, cross-reference to 12, 13].

Then, the question arises as to which specific Gestalt will be prevalent for each individual, let alone uniform across the group, since, in general, there could be many options of forming it [14]. One of the frequent scenarios of Gestalt-formation in social settings from the viewpoint of Gestalt-oriented social psychology would rely on the laws of *consistency* and *proximity* [15]. Consistency can be deciphered as a will of an individual to be consistent/to fit in with the surrounding background, such as provided by e.g. one's *Weltanschauung*. Consistency and proximity working together lead individual's psycheto select the shortest and simplest path towards that outcome. Since the author now realizes that language training that had been given to the students in question had been mainly performance-oriented, then it is likely that the two had been working together to form a most unfortunate Gestalt. Namely, consistency taken alongside the focus on performance would mean that proximity is best modelled within an individual's psyche by the pair of opposites, e.g. *competent-incompetent*, or *competent They, incompetent I*. Hegel [16,17] identified *negation* as the most basic part of human thought, which is present in any thought-forms and involves differences, or pair of opposites. If we combine the latter observation with the Gestalt law of *Prägnanz* – the psyche's innate preference for simplest/most basic Gestalt available – it makes a strong case for a most plausible Gestalt formation route, and the observations of the students' class given in the second section of the article lend support to this conclusion.

Furthermore, if one adopts an alternative strategy for surmising key Gestalt processes, one still arrives at a similar result which acts not to refute the above picture but to make it fuller. Specifically, two additional basic perceptions of Gestalt can be identified here. The first of them seems 'productive': it refers to a class of students as a *unity*, maintaining coherence (many TEFL strategies, such as scaffolding, liaison building strategy, involvement activities depend and build on it [18]). The second possible Gestalt is the realization or externalization of the individual's fear of failing by manifesting and promoting one's failure. Viewed in isolation, the first Gestalt direction may at first seem productive in comparison with the second one. In truth, not only both Gestalt routes are detrimental in the given case, but both *work together* to form a fixed suboptimal Gestalt, a complex, which cannot be easily untangled without active intervention on the side of a

teacher. The processes partaking in the formation of this complex are shown in figure 1.

The scheme in figure 1 provides an insight into how the detrimental complex forms, the quotation marks being representative of a less able students' psyche content in the given class. While the above paragraph laid out the reasoning that led to uncovering the elements – or, using Hegel's terms – *moments*[16, 17] of the Gestalt, one can now look more closely at the role each moment plays in the formation of the suboptimal Gestalt-attractor:

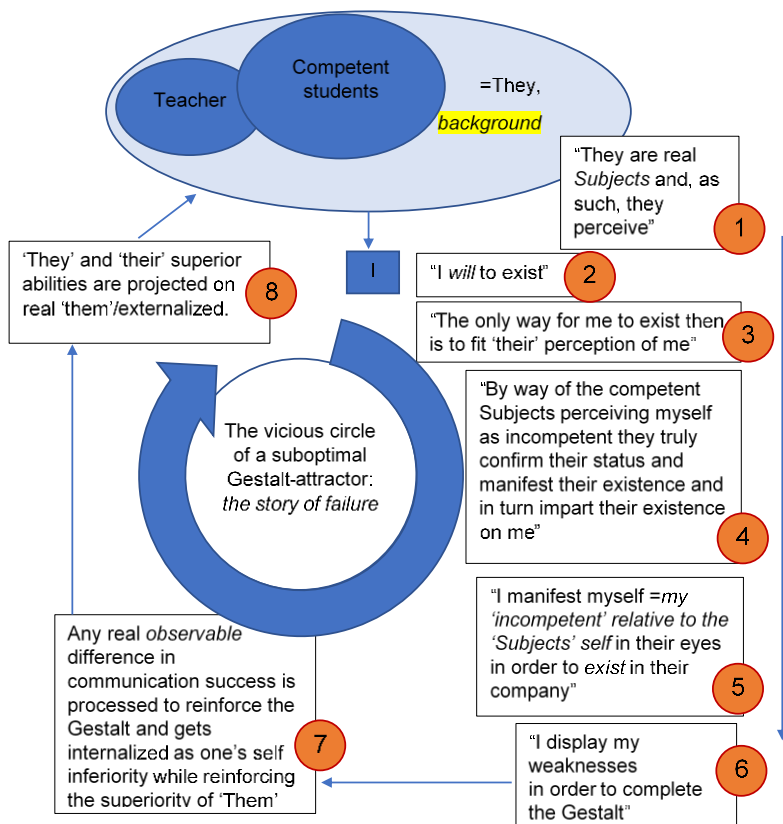


Figure 1. Formation of an undesirable complex in the given context

Moment 1. It is evident from looking at the Gestalt figure that there is no precise “beginning” or “end”. Likewise, if one starts at the element quite arbitrarily labeled (1), its role cannot become fully clear until one glances over the entire scheme. Alternatively, it’s possible to think of (1) as a name, a description, a placeholder for all the subsequent development. Akin to a well-known general observation made by exponents of the Gestalt theory, here too only the whole picture can explain the parts: it is not possible to answer directly why ‘they’ would be authentic and ‘I’ would *not*, playing a kind of an impostor role – without going through the whole circle. Such effects are typical for Gestalts; it has been observed that standard formal logic that gives rise to rational or rationalized sequences of the type “A causes B, B causes C” is not strictly possible here and faces a limitation [19].

With that said, a reference can be made to the famous exposition of *Master-Slave dialectic* in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (17) as being the general driver for *competent They–incompetent I* dialectic featuring in the scheme. It is worth noting that it took Hegel hundreds of pages of densely written text to theoretically and universally approach the conceptual development of such dialectic.

Moment 2. The desire to complete a previously set task into a Gestalt is often thought as a foundation of organismic desires [11,12,13]. Gestalt can be thus thought as life-supporting, even if ‘life’ means dismal existence in cases psyche does not see the alternatives. That is in line with the understanding that many complexes form as defense mechanisms that make the psyche choose dismal existence in comparison with perceived non-existence.

Moment 3 is an example of the mechanism of *adaptation*. It is the manifestation of the above-mentioned defense mechanism [13, 14].

Moment 4: the narrative at this stage features all the stages (1)-(4), so the spirit is becoming *aware* of itself – or has the status of being in-and-for-itself in Hegel’s terms [16, 17].

Moment 5 is the same as 4 but put into *action* – the next step in a Gestalt cycle of experience. The spirit again parts with itself to recreate the environment around it – if one employs Hegel’s language.

Moment 6 is the process known as externalization, or ‘naming’ the essence, attaching labels that confirm it in what effectively is the externalization of belief [see more in 12,13]. The spirit has finished the partition and has fully externalized itself.

In moments 6-7 externalization switches to internalization. This is the reason that Gestalt theory is incomplete without solid dialectical foundation that shows that externalization and internalization are itself two faces of the same coin. The spirit reclaims its role in parts' development as the ultimate cause of it.

Moment 7. Reality is drawn back into the myth created/co-created by the individual to confirm it: this is the stage of confirmation and ossification. The spirit and the perception of reality are now sufficiently developed for the spirit to cease maintaining the 'complete' reality, and so reality 'oozes' from it freely.

In the moment 8 internalization-externalization processes again switch places back to the original configuration to *close* the higher-order Gestalt and set the Gestalt circuit going again; the resulting externalization of 'overbearing' others—the transition back to the moment 1 – finally takes place.

The dialectic process in the stages 1-8 can be summarized as follows: the response to the social environment focused on performance has as its basic form the division between competent actors and incompetent. The 'competent' (used here as a noun and notion) can be seen as encompassing the 'incompetent', i.e. as having already undergone the transformation from 'incompetent' to 'competent' (this is congruent to the dialectical developments in the *Science of Logic* [17]). The 'incompetent' doesn't get the chance to experience the full transformation, since being in the presence of the overbearing competent users triggers the shortcut to a 'suboptimal' Gestalt and precludes the full Gestalt development as that of competent users.

#### **4 Theoretical solution**

The way out of the suboptimal Gestalt is the realization that it is one's own consciousness that makes one subservient to the *Master* (or the 'competent'), it is actually within the 'subservient' subject itself, and the latter in principle has the power to 'stand the whole thing on its head', invert it, thus removing the block to efficient learning. With that said, the spirit that could organize it is not always within the immediate grasp of the conscious self, so the question arises as to what kind of external help may be possible. Such help may come by making the student confront the *object*, not the subject, thereby removing the overbearing subject/its effect. This can only be done by creating *separation* between the individuals. However, complete separation



would mean the whole group coherence disappearing, so instead one could create an objective buffer/interface between the individuals, installing subject-object negation as primary instead of Master-Slave negation, allowing the former however, to be negated again (subject-object-subject, *negation of negation*) in the form of a true collective spirit of cooperation.

Making perceived superiority or inferiority an object instead of a subject allows the individuals confront the problem, while the productive ‘collective’ spirit makes the techniques relying on it – scaffolding, liaison building strategy, involvement activities[18] – turn meaningful and productive. The transition from suboptimal Gestalt to productive Gestalt can be illustrated by the diagram in figure 2.

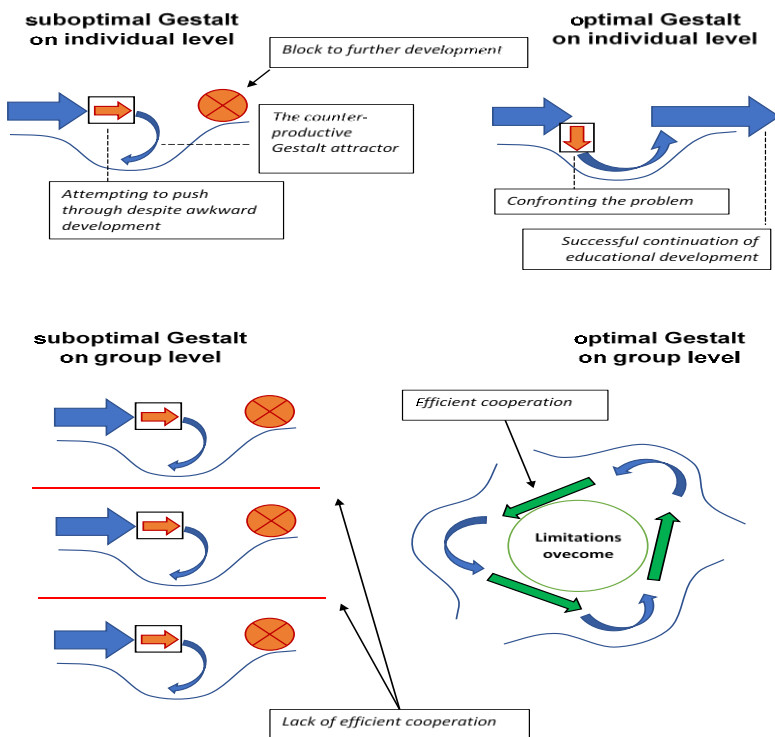


Figure 2. Graphic representation of transforming the Gestalt

## 5 Practical implementation and conclusions

The theoretical reasoning provided in the previous paragraph motivated the following stages of practical implementation.

(1) A suitable platform for asynchronous learning was selected. As a result, part of the pressure was relieved once the students learned they do not have to be simultaneously present online and perform spontaneously.

(2) The students were first provided with the tasks they are most comfortable with: multiple choice and writing. The tasks were created with the view to make the successful outcome appear in a form of phrases that are easily re-usable in a dialogue format.

(3) One of the more confident students was asked to record a simplified dialogue with the teacher and to make a concise presentation of steps needed to set up the recording. Here, the focus was on working with the platform, *not* the dialogue itself. The dialogue and platform were placed in a figure-ground Gestalt relationship, meaning to picture success in dialogues as *complementing* success with easily manageable non-linguistic operations.

(4) The students were asked to work in pairs (free choice of partner) and record their dialogues in the comfort of their own pace and company allowing for indefinite practice 'behind the scenes'. As recordings started to come in, the less able students could listen to successful speech examples as *object* not as subject. The anxiety of recording which they had to meet face-to-face brought their (*now manageable*) fear to the surface and at the same time helped eliminate it.

(5) Once the confidence was built the format could be shifted from asynchronous to synchronous, this time getting students to do a very similar task to the one before with a good deal of language material imported from the successful previous stage and simple new one gradually introduced in a form of comfortable tasks. Again, the success of the switch from an asynchronous format to a synchronous format was pictured to be connected to performing predictable, easy-to-handle material.

As a result, the speech production difficulties have largely been overcome: the speech of students who struggled previously has started to feature much less hesitation and trembling, the motivation has also increased, the flow of conversation is rarely interrupted by long pauses.

Such positive changes indicate that the multi-step process of gradually inverting some of the counterproductive moments by shifting the focus to more manageable ‘figure’ while making use of the ‘background’ progress is helpful, and Gestalt-dialectical approach is a powerful tool in teaching English as a foreign language.

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## 从文化的角度探寻中俄边境贸易存在的问题及应对建议

韩丹

黑龙江外国语学院

摘

要：中俄边境贸易在中俄双边贸易中发挥着越来越重要的作用，但是在中俄边境贸易中也存在着很多问题，阻碍着中俄贸易的发