

Elevating the development of listening skills to foster SLA in an Asian context

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Abstract

In EFL curricula where language is taught as a knowledge set, links between pedagogical theory and practice can be quite strong. However, links between pedagogical theory and practice seems more tenuous when applied to the teaching of skills, in particular, L2 listening skills which are often left to develop as by-products of a student's grammatical and lexical understanding. And, in many contexts, this oversight can have serious consequences. Given that English is a stress-timed language, learners coming from syllable-timed or mora-timed languages, such as Japanese or Korean, can be robbed of learning opportunities when listening skills are deficient. The crucial role of comprehensible input in second language acquisition is well established, so when learners have developed listening skills, all language that is basically understood is available as a learning opportunity as comprehensible input. However, when learners have incipient listening skills, learners are often unable to comprehend auditory input containing words that are largely understood, thus losing opportunities for L2 language development. Learners coming from syllable-timed or mora-timed languages often lack a natural understanding of suprasegmental phonology, impeding comprehension. It is well established in the research literature that listening skills are best taught as a set of sub-skills to help students develop a basic phonetic awareness, however such research findings have not always made it into practice. This qualitative study reports on a set of first year university students at a Japanese university where listening was taught as a set of sub-skills. An overwhelming majority felt this type of instruction helped to improve their listening skills, suggesting that this fundamental pedagogy needs greater emphasis in countries with syllable-timed or mora-timed native languages. The results of this study are described and interpreted in the context of the English education system in Japan.

Keywords: listening skills, EFL curricula, comprehensible input

Introduction

The ability to comprehend spoken forms of a target language is a crucial factor for second language development and yet in many EFL curricula, the explicit teaching of listening skills draws little pedagogical attention. As noted by Nunan, (2002) listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning, always overlooked for its elder sister— speaking. Teachers and curricula tend to focus on grammar or vocabulary, leaving listening skills to develop on their own. And, in many contexts, this deprives language learners of many opportunities to further learn.

Comprehending auditory input requires an understanding of the target language sound system. However, the phonologies of human language are not universal constants. English, for example, is a stress-timed, or foot-timed language, and has a regular rhythm pattern. As Halliday points out, salient syllables tend to occur at regular intervals as “generally speaking, speakers of English like their feet to all be roughly the same length.” (Halliday, 1994: 293) The tendency for salient syllables to be prominent at regular intervals, irrespective of the actual number of syllables between prominence, results in function words being reduced to accommodate the regular spacing of syllable prominence. The tendency to have salient syllables at regular intervals is known as isochrony and is a feature of stress timed languages such as English. Isochrony is the mechanism that governs such suprasegmental phonological features as vowel reduction, elision, elipsis and so on.

However, not all language are isochronous. Syllable-timed languages such as Korean, where the time needed to pronounce each syllable is roughly equal, and mora-timed languages such as Japanese, where the time needed to pronounce each mora is roughly equal, are phonologically distinct from English. As a result, syllable-timed and mora-timed languages often lack many of the common suprasegmental phonological features found in English. For Japanese learners, the phonological structure of Japanese can interfere with the comprehension of naturally spoken English.

Listening skills can broadly be divided into two categories: bottom-up decoding and top-down interpretation. Bottom-up decoding refers to the process of decoding and assigning meaning to auditory input. Top-down interpretation describes the process of using knowledge of grammar, discourse, context and culture to assign meaning, both filling in the gaps of understanding and augmenting meaning.

Received pedagogy, based on numerous empirical studies, has been to explicitly teach learners about the sound system, both its segmentals and suprasegmentals, together with a regime of top-down strategies. (see for example Richards, 1983,

1990; Peterson, 1991; Goh 1997, Field 1998; Vandergrift, 1999) Although, well found in the research literature, this aspect of teaching is frequently overlooked.

In Japan, listening is very much subservient to grammar. One likely reason is that most Japanese universities do not have a listening component on their entrance exams. As a result, there is little incentive for high schools to add listening to their curricula. Yet, when many students struggle with listening comprehension, this omission puts students at a disadvantage.

It is well understood that comprehensible input is crucial for language acquisition (see for example, Krashen, 1985; Long 1985). Students need massive amounts of input to acquire an understanding of a target language. The more comprehensible input one gets, the more one will learn. So when learners from a mora-timed language background are not taught about the English sound system, they are often unable to comprehend auditory input that would otherwise be comprehensible, and thus lose vital opportunities for L2 language acquisition.

The development of listening skills should be a priority from early education on to maximize learning opportunities. That it is subservient is perhaps one reason for the chronically low English abilities that the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science and Technology is currently seeking to change in time for the 2020 Olympics.

Purpose of Study

A weakness in previous studies has been a lack of awareness that learners from different phonological backgrounds might be different. Studies tend to treat L2 learners as being part of a great monolithic category, L2 learner. There have been many empirical studies which have repeatedly found that explicitly pointing out the phonological features of English can facilitate gains in listening comprehension, however most of these studies have been done with students from mixed phonological backgrounds. This study brings the voice of students coming from a mora-timed phonological background to the table. This study investigates student opinion about whether explicit guidance is needed to help develop listening skills, and secondly, if students feel that such guidance contributes to improved listening comprehension.

Participants

The participants in the study were 94 first year university students (79 males and 15 females) in three different classes studying English as a required first-year course in the engineering faculty at a well regarded science university in Tokyo. Most of the

students in the class were quite motivated to learn English, seeing English as important for their futures. Although the English proficiency level of the students was not directly measured during the course of the study, the entrance exam system in Japan acts to level students, in that all of the students in the study had to pass an English exam to enter the university. As a result, most of the students in the engineering department could be said to be at an intermediate or threshold level (CEFR B1) of English proficiency. Although there were 94 students registered in the three classes, survey data from only 80 students was used due to either incomplete data or student absences.

Class Procedure

The class was typical of many first year English courses in Japan. It was taught by a native speaker of English, the writer, with a focus on oral communication. According to the school handbook, the purpose of the course was to develop a basic foundation in communicative English by giving students exposure to natural, *raw* English and develop the students' listening and speaking skills.

All the classes were 90 minutes long. Typically each class started with a basic warm-up activity which was usually an easy, unchallenging speaking activity. This was usually followed by a listening activity where students were asked to answer a few basic comprehension questions. Following this activity, the listening was deconstructed with a listening activity that focused student attention on a particular suprasegmental feature that was present in the initial listening. Students were made aware of the phonological feature and given opportunities to listen to other short sentences where the target feature was present. After the listening focus, the rest of the class time was spent working on speaking activities and obviously such activities also featured listening, in that students had to listen to each other to complete the speaking activities.

The material used for the class was based on CEFR standards for B1 level classes. Listening activities in the class took many forms. There were comprehension listenings where students had to listen to a passage and then answer comprehension questions. There were analytical listenings where students were introduced to a particular phonological feature, then had to identify that feature in a follow-up listening. Lastly, there were teacher sourced dictation activities that were used to either review a particular suprasegmental feature or introduce it. All three listening types were used routinely.

The concept was to introduce students to natural, connected speech through exposure to reduced form English with a reduced lexical load. With such material students would often struggle to answer the questions, reporting that they had understood only

50% to 60% of the listening. However, when asked to check the scripts, students constantly found that knew close to 100% of the words used in the listening. The analytical listenings were based on the main comprehension listenings, as the audio material consisted of single sentences that had been pulled from the comprehension listenings in order to give students a closer look at the phonological features.

For homework students were asked to listen to the comprehension listenings repeatedly, until they could understand each listening with 100% comprehension. The teacher referred this activity as *perfect listening*.

Instrumentation

A questionnaire was administered at the end of the course. The questions were asked in Japanese and students were encouraged to make further comments in either English or Japanese. Relevant to this study, the following questions were asked:

1. Do you feel that your listening ability has improved this year?
2. Do you feel knowing about stress, weak vowels, dropped sounds and so on, has helped you to
improve your listening ability?
3. Do you think *perfect listening* is a good way to improve your listening skills?
4. Do you feel it is necessary for students to receive explicit instructions on how to improve their
listening skills?

The Results

Most students in the study felt that their listening abilities had improved over the course of the school year, with 80% reporting some improvement. Asked if knowledge about phonology was helpful in improving one's listening skills 92.5% answered in the affirmative. Many students commented that knowing about the phonological features made it easier to catch the meaning. Quite clearly, most students felt that knowledge of the English sound system contributed to the development of their own listening abilities.

With respect to the *perfect listening* technique described above, listening to a particular passage repeatedly until it can be perfectly understood, again the overwhelming view was that this was a useful technique with 93.75% of students answering positively. However, even with this positive rating, when asked if they actually tried this technique, just over half of the students reported actually doing this, as many students reported that they did not have the spare time needed to this,

which possibly suggests that this has to be worked into the curriculum more effectively.

With respect to guidance, 80% of students felt that guidance was necessary to help students develop their listening abilities. The most popular reason given was that guidance made learning more efficient. In addition to efficiency gains, most of the others reasons given were was that having guidance helped sustain motivation and that guidance made it easier to tackle the difficult task of learning to comprehend naturally spoken English.

The results of the questionnaire are shown in Table 1.

	Strong Yes	Yes	No	Strong No
1. Did your listening improve?	2	62	15	1
2. Does knowledge of phonological features help?	20	54	5	1
3. Do you think <i>perfect listening</i> is helpful?	16	59	4	1
4. Is guidance necessary?	24	40	14	2

Discussion

Many theories on listening take a global focus on how learners apply meaning to auditory input, postulating that learners use textual schemata—knowledge of discourse, and content schemata— knowledge of the world and its contextual clues, to assign meaning to the incoming auditory input. In these *schema-theoretic* perspectives learners draw on schema to provide a frame of reference by which listeners assign meaning to auditory input. (see for example Long, 1989). As a result many pedagogies have focused on stimulating and developing these top-down schemata. However, for learners from a mora-timed phonological background, the more problematic area of listening is not appending meaning to decoded input, but rather the decoding process itself. Meaning that pedagogies that focus on the more global processes, tend to assume that the decoding skills are naturally picked up.

However, in a Japanese context where learners struggle to decode input, an *information processing* model might be more helpful to identify and understand where listening comprehension impediments exist. In such a model, learners decode auditory input in an ascending order of complexity, from phonemes, to syllables, to words and lexical chunks, on to a syntactic level where intonation is factored in. Meaning is finally rendered referencing the context, at the apex of this processing stream. (see for example Field, 2008) Suprasegmental decoding difficulties result in many learners getting stuck at the lower levels of this model. However, European-

based pedagogical models often focus on higher-level processing, leaving lower-level processing to develop as a felicitous by-product of simple exposure, something not so suited for many Asian contexts.

However, even in Japan lower-level listening skills are often neglected. There are numerous reasons for this. First of all, pedagogy is often guided by what is done in Europe and America. Secondly but perhaps more importantly, listening is rarely tested in university entrance exams. These influential entrance exams tend to focus on difficult aspects of vocabulary and grammar. As a result, teachers tend to focus on the grammar that will likely come up on these exams.

When attention is focussed on test preparation, skills development becomes ancillary. As a result, students with weak listening skills are not often recognized as having weak listening skills. And, given that listening comprehension is a key component of second language acquisition, this inattention to skills development can result in years of lost learning opportunities, opportunities which cannot be replaced.

Moreover and somewhat sadly, empirical research shows that listening skills can be taught, meaning that these lost opportunities need not be lost. In an Asian context, Goh (1997) found that an increased learner metacognitive awareness in listening was positively correlated with better listening skills. Tsui and Fullilove (1998) found that bottom-up processing was an important factor for listening performance. The students in this study agreed.

Were a pedagogical choice to focus on listening made and listening skills development made a priority, more learning opportunities could be given to language learners during the early stages of their language development. Listening comprehension is a teachable skill. And in the context of Japan, with a mora-timed L1, students can benefit from such instruction.

Conclusion

Listening is central to learning. It is the foundation of a formal education and it is the foundation of language acquisition. As teachers, perhaps our number one responsibility, irrespective of what we teach, is the responsibility to prepare our students to act in the greater world beyond the classroom, both in the present and in the future. The world is full of learning opportunities and for language learners, there are numerous linguistic resources waiting to be found and exploited to one's best advantage. Teaching our students how to listen will help them to access the world outside the classroom.

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