Teaching Effective Second Language Listening

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Abstract

In Japan, listening is given focused attention in the second language (L2) classroom. This paper begins by reviewing the nature of listening as well as the processing involved when listening. Content validity, purposefulness and transferability, listening or memory considerations, a teaching or testing orientation, and authentic listening are discussed. By examining these five elements of effective listening materials and also factors that affect comprehension, instructors can evaluate textbooks and create materials that best meet the needs of their learners. This paper explores the need to supplement textbooks with listening strategy instruction that integrates micro-skill training with a variety of listening purposes and all of the aspects of the nature of listening. The article concludes with a practical example of how theory was successfully applied in the development of L2 materials for a Japanese junior college class.

In the distant past, listening was often viewed as a passive activity and as a skill that did not need to be directly taught in the second language (L2) classroom, but this approach to teaching listening comprehension changed. For some time, listening has been viewed as a process that involves the active participation of the listenter; both auditory and visual clues are used to decipher utterances (Van Duzer, 1997, p. 2). Because listening is used two to five times more often than the other macro-skills of speaking, reading, and writing and because listening proficiency significantly contributes to an L2 learner's overall proficiency (Morley, 1999), listening is a skill that should be taught in its own right and also integrated into other L2 classes. To effectively teach listening to L2 students, it is necessary to understand the nature of listening, the processing involved when listening, elements that make listening materials effective, and factors that affect aural comprehension. With this knowledge, instructors can make informed decisions when evaluating listening materials for the L2 classroom.

The Nature of Listening

There are a series of steps involved when listening, but they are not always linear. While the input or an image of the input is held in short-term memory, the listener determines a reason for listening (Van Duzer, 1997). S/he also unconsciously divides the input into parts that are used to determine the assumed meaning, referred to as the propositions of the utterance (Richards, 1987). Simultaneously, the listener determines the type of interaction or speech event, predicts expected messages, instantiates schemata and scripts, infers the goals of the speaker as well as the speaker's intention (i.e., the illocutionary force), acts on the information, and determines whether the propositions were correctly interpreted (Hadley, 2001; Van Duzer, 1997). Schemata include "the organized background knowledge which leads us to *expect* or predict aspects in our interpretation of discourse" (Brown & Yule, 1983, p. 248), and scripts are structures that describe "in a predetermined, stereotypic fashion appropriate sequences of events in a particular context" (Hadley, 2001, p. 147). In the same instant that the utterances are heard, the propositions are retained while the form of the original message is deleted from short-term memory (Richards, 1987). The listener is, however, generally unconscious of these processes.

Processing

Two types of processing occur simultaneously during listening, and both are unconsciously utilized as the listener attempts to overcome a lack of understanding (Peterson, 1991). Bottom-up processing refers to the derivation of meaning by decoding sounds to form words that are then combined into clauses (Morley, 1991). The listener uses the parts to decipher the whole meaning. In contrast, the listener uses top-down processing when s/he applies background information and makes inferences about the propositions by moving from the larger text to the parts (Hadley, 2001, p. 148). This processing is "driven by listeners' expectations and understandings of the nature of text and the nature of the world" (Peterson, 1991, p. 109). When the schemata and scripts of the target language are quite different from those of the listener's first language, s/he will find the unfamiliar content more difficult to interpret. In such cases, instantiating this knowledge allows the listener to more easily understand and anticipate the flow of utterances. Consequently, in the L2 classroom, pre-listening activities such as discussions, elicitation of lexicon, and the use of drawings or real-life objects are effective ways of instantiating schemata and scripts. These activities can also be efficient ways of providing the listener with

lexicon that will be necessary in the listening exercises.

Elements of Effective Listening Materials

By being aware of the nature of listening and the processing of input, effective listening materials that are appropriate for specific L2 students can be selected and developed. The literature on teaching L2 listening suggests there are several essential elements that should be included in listening materials, but this list is not all-inclusive. Other factors, such as the listeners and their specific needs, must also be examined so the objectives, listening topics, and tasks are relevant to the learners. This is vital since engaging the listener increases comprehension (Van Duzer, 1997) and decreases debilitating anxiety that can result when the material is too advanced for the learner (Hadley, 2001, pp. 188-189).

The first element to consider when evaluating L2 listening materials is content validity. For listening materials to be valid, they should require the listener to utilize listening skills rather than other skills (e.g., reading, deduction, general knowledge of the world) to complete the task (Richards, 1987). Richards (1987, p. 171) noted that valid listening activities also require the students to apply real-world listening skills and behavior. As a result, L2 learners should be given opportunities to practice in a range of contexts and functions (Hadley, 2001), including one-way communication and interactive bi-directional and multidirectional communication (Mendelsohn, 1998; Morley, 1999). One-way listening, however, is often the primary focus of traditional listening classes.

Validity is related to the second element, purposefulness and transferability (Richards, 1987). Transferability is possible at the content level, the outcome level, or both (Morley, 1991). An activity that asks the listener to count the number of times s/he hears the word *go* lacks transferability and purposefulness because at the content level it does not reflect normal, natural behavior. In addition, the type of information that the learner must provide (i.e., the outcome of the task) is not necessary to accomplish a listening task in the real world. Finally, while this activity may develop the ability to perform well on classroom tests, it does not help the learner master the listening skills that are required to have real-world conversations.

The third element, whether the activity relies on the “retrieval of information from long-term memory rather than on the processing activities themselves” (Richards, 1987, p. 171), should also be considered when evaulating validity. If the listener is asked to recall information after the listening passage is over, the focus is

on memory instead of comprehension (Richards, 1987). For example, when the learner listens and determines why or where the conversation is taking place, the activity is more comprehension-based, but when the learner is asked to remember as many details as possible after listening to a dialogue, short-term memory skills are emphasized and become an important factor in the student's ability to successfully accomplish the activity.

The fourth element of effective L2 listening materials is the extent to which the activity teaches new listening skills. Because many listening tasks actually test, task selection must include an evaluation of how much each activity is related to testing instead of teaching (Richards, 1987, pp. 171-172). For example, although the listen-and-answer question format emphasizes L2 listening as an independent skill (Morley, 1999, Model #2), it does not ask the learner to do anything with the information. Similarly, question-oriented instruction, such as listening activities that use true-false questions and follow-up vocabulary exercises, does not ask the learner to use the language functionally (Morley, 1991). As such, the activities are focused on testing. When language proficiency tests drive the L2 listening class curriculum, students prepare for the uni-directional listening of tests at the expense of developing listening strategies and skills that enable them to listen in real-world contexts.

Task-focused instruction differs from testing-focused activities in three ways. First, tasks that focus on communicative competence (i.e., grammatical, sociolinguistic, strategic, and discourse competence; Yalden, 1987) provide students with opportunities to develop strategies that they can use to more effectively learn the target language. Task-oriented instruction, therefore, includes analyzing aspects of language structure and language use (Morley, 1991). Second, task-oriented instruction often has pre-listening tasks that instantiate schemata and scripts to increase comprehension. Third, teaching activities may have proportionately more pre-listening and active listening tasks and fewer post-listening tasks than activities that are more test-oriented (Richards, 1987, p. 172).

The fifth element affecting the effectiveness of L2 listening activities is authenticity. Authenticity is essential for transferability to the real world (Porter & Roberts, 1987, p. 178); unauthentic dialogues do not prepare learners for realistic communicative events. Factors affecting authenticity include organization based on clauses, enunciation (i.e., reduced forms such as slurred words and dropped consonants), ungrammaticality, hesitations, rate of delivery, rhythm and stress, cohesion, content, and the degree of interaction (Richards, 1987). An artificially slow

dialogue that lacks real-world lexicon, avoids reduced forms, and has no hesitations or rephrasing may be easier for a learner to understand but it is not authentic. Dialogues also lack authenticity when the speakers exaggerate their intonation, when there is unnatural repetition, and when participants say equal amounts (Porter & Roberts, 1987). In contrast, dialogues that have conversational overlap, background noise, and attention signals (e.g., *uhuh*, *mmm*) reflect real-life conversations, making them more authentic.

In addition to having an authentic text (i.e., input), it is necessary to have authentic uses (i.e., tasks); this is also related to validity, purposefulness, transferability, and a teaching orientation. Authentic materials that address L2 learners' needs and cognitive maturity level also make class time more effective (Spelleri, 2002). This is particularly true in the case of adult learners because authentic materials combine language and cultural learning with practical applications (Spelleri, 2002).

A dialogue can be authentic even when it has been simulated. The distinction, therefore, between unmodified authentic discourse and simulated authentic discourse is helpful. In the former, the language remains in its original communicative form. In the latter, however, the language has features of authenticity but it has been produced for the L2 classroom. For L2 students who panic and assume that unmodified authentic discourse is beyond their comprehension, simulated authentic discourse should be considered.

Factors Affecting Aural Comprehension

Listening comprehension can be influenced by a variety of factors. For example, if the subject is familiar to the listener (e.g., about everyday occasions), his/her comprehension is likely to be greater than if relevant schemata have not been instantiated. Comprehension is also affected by the physical medium (e.g., face-to-face, telephone, radio, TV), the setting (e.g., party, classroom, formal meeting), the attitudes of the listener and the speaker(s), and the degree to which the discourse is planned (Richards, 1987). Furthermore, the features of authenticity discussed above also influence the listener's perception of difficulty.

Rubin (1994) identified five broad characteristics that affect listening comprehension: text, interlocutor, task, listener, and process. Some of the elements of these characteristics, such as age, aptitude, gender, and attention, are static and, therefore, beyond the influence of the L2 instructor. Over time, however, the

instructor may be able to positively influence listener characteristics such as motivation, confidence level, and L2 proficiency. By incorporating elements of Rubin's characteristics (1994) into listening materials, L2 instructors can assist learners in their development of strategies to enhance understanding and to overcome comprehension difficulties. For example, by using a pre-listening discussion of who has traveled by airplane and then eliciting the types of announcements one might hear in an airport or on an airplane, background knowledge, which Rubin (1994) defined as a listener characteristic, can be utilized. Some of the text characteristics, task characteristics, and process characteristics (Rubin, 1994) that lend themselves to L2 classroom instruction include

- communication contexts,
- the negotiation of comprehensible input,
- speech rates,
- hesitation,
- pausing, including duration, distribution, frequency, and filled and unfilled pauses,
- errors and false starts that even native speakers make,
- reduced forms,
- the number of interlocutors,
- the use of visual supports, including body language.

Teaching listening strategies for these elements will also enable learners to comprehend increasingly complex authentic texts. In addition, instructors must continue to assist students in recognizing cohesive devices, developing their grammar structures, and expanding their lexicon because these elements affect understanding and are factors in each learner's perceived difficulty of a listening text.

Pedagogical Implications

Mendelsohn (1998) examined eight listening or listening and speaking textbooks and found that listening was recognized as a distinguishable skill and pre-listening activities were used. He also discovered, however, that the textbooks lacked instruction on developing listening abilities or strategies and continued to be organized around topics rather than strategies. Consequently, in addition to selecting commercially available teaching materials that will most effectively teach a specific group of L2 students, it is necessary to develop listening materials to supplement textbooks. A hybrid approach, one in which materials integrate both topical and

strategy orientations while at the same time addressing the needs and the interests of specific learners, may be the most effective teaching option. When instructors develop supplemental materials for their L2 classes, they can address their students' weaknesses with input that requires different reasons for listening. Instructors can also tailor the materials so that they develop students' skills to predict messages, to infer meaning, to identify the type of interaction or speech event, to utilize schemata and scripts, and to determine the interlocutor's illocutionary force. In other words, L2 materials will then include all of the aspects of the nature of listening discussed in this paper.

It is also necessary to create materials that provide additional training in the micro-skills in which the students lack confidence. Richards' taxonomy of listening skills (1987), which includes a non-comprehensive list of 51 micro-skills required for conversational and academic listening, reflects the complexity of aural comprehension. This elaborateness has not been lost on students. The learners in a qualitative study of Japanese students studying English at an American university emphasized the difficulty of listening tasks (Shimo, 2002). Field (1998) suggested that rather than viewing answers to listening activities as correct or incorrect, instructors should use incorrect answers as an opportunity to diagnose where students are struggling and assist them in overcoming these difficulties.

Instructor-developed supplemental materials can also provide additional variety in the students' L2 learning. Because language is used both for social interaction and to convey information (e.g., giving directions, requesting, instructing) (Morley, 1991, p. 86), listening activities should allow students to practice both bottom-up and top-down processing in combination with both social interaction and conveying information. These activities should be used to teach and develop L2 listening skills rather than only test them. They must also be authentic, purposeful, and transferable to the real world so that learners will be able to communicate as well outside of the classroom as they can in it. One textbook cannot adequately cover all of the requirements of listening materials, but instructor-developed materials can supplement the textbook's missing elements while at the same time meeting the specific needs of a group of learners.

It is important not only to develop listening materials that are theoretically sound but also to ensure the learners' acceptance of the materials. Shimo (2002) discovered student attitudes that inhibit effective L2 listening classes. The students in the study underestimated and even doubted the educational value of listening

activities, specifically those that allowed the students to enjoy learning. The students in Shimo's study (2002) seemed to equate pain with gain, and as a result, activities that they found undemanding were also deemed unimportant. These attitudes are not, however, unique to the students in Shimo's study; some Japanese university students have expressed this sentiment to the author. It is, therefore, essential that listening materials have face validity, possessing intrinsic authority and value in the eyes of the users. To increase face validity, it is necessary to explain the purpose of each listening activity so the students will not discount the task as non-academic or unimportant even if the students enjoy the learning process.

A Practical Application: Announcements in Public Transportation

Like the textbooks Mendelsohn (1998) reviewed, many of the textbooks currently available in Japan that the author examined lack listening strategy instruction. This paper concludes with an example of a practical listening application used in an L2 classroom at a Japanese junior college. The listening materials that were developed focus on four announcements—one in an airport, one in a train station, and two on trains. Traveling is a common topic in many L2 textbooks, with contexts such as immigration, checking in at an airport, and getting a meal on an airplane. Announcements such as those developed for this lesson are less common in listening and conversation textbooks.

The lesson takes approximately 45 minutes. During the 10 minutes of pre-listening activities, the students work as a whole class. The pre-listening focuses the students' attention and instantiates schemata and scripts. First, different ways to go from London to Paris (e.g., car, bus, train, plane, bicycle) are elicited. Next, students are asked to supply the names of the buildings and places where they get on and off different modes of public transportation (i.e., airport, bus station, train station) and where a plane and train are entered or exited (i.e., gate, platform). Finally, the words *arrive, depart, get on,* and *get off* are elicited. Students are told that *getting on* is also referred to as *board.*

The enhancing phase, lasting 15 minutes, also utilizes whole class listening and discussions. First, the students listen to the tape for orientation (i.e., to determine whether the announcement has something to do with train, plane, or bus transportation). After a class discussion, the students listen a second time to find out where people who hear this announcement are (e.g., at an airport, on the platform at

a train station). After getting the handout, students listen a third time, making notes of details such as destination, gate number, platform number, and which train cars are non-smoking.

The synthesizing phase follows; for the next 15-17 minutes, students work as individuals, in pairs, and finally again as a whole class. After listening to the tape three times, the students are told that in real life the announcement is not immediately repeated so they must use the communication strategies of asking for repetition, asking for clarification, and asking for confirmation to discover the information they could not write down. One benefit of this activity is that it allows lower-level students to get assistance and the required information from higher-level students. Students must not ask one person for all of the missing information. A comical demonstration reinforces the reality of not asking a stranger seven or eight questions about the previous announcement. After students have interviewed classmates, the answers are elicited, and there is an all-class discussion of areas that students found most difficult.

Following the synthesizing phase, there is a short wrap-up of approximately three minutes. The tape is played a final time to allow students to hear the announcements now that they know all of the information. This allows them to focus on the parts they did not understand, to reinforce the format of these types of announcements, and to give them confidence that they can understand announcements in the future. Afterward, questions are answered.

Meet Learners' Interests and Needs

This lesson is part of a series to prepare Japanese junior college students to travel abroad. Using a questionnaire at the beginning of the semester, traveling was found to be a motivating factor for many of the students. By creating materials that are both interesting and useful for the students, their motivation is heightened (Spelleri, 2002).

The learners for which these materials were designed often believed they must understand everything or they could not understand anything, thereby demanding total comprehension from themselves. The listening materials were designed to help them realize that in many situations, total comprehension is not necessary. Furthermore, communication strategies such as asking for repetition, asking for clarification, and asking for confirmation allow L2 listeners and speakers to handle potential communication breakdowns by negotiating comprehensible input (Dornyei &

Scott, 1997), but these students had not developed these strategies and needed encouragement to use them. Using the listening materials, which had been tailored to their needs, the students practiced these communication strategies.

Processing

During the lesson, bottom-up processing is required when students must discern names that are unfamiliar to them (e.g., Northwest, Detroit). Top-down processing is utilized when schemata and scripts are instantiated.

Hybrid Approach

The listening materials combine a topical approach (i.e., listening to announcements associated with public transportation) with a strategy orientation. To facilitate the latter, the listening is focused and the purposes are explained by the instructor. In addition, the activities are guided so the students use knowledge of the topic to predict lexicon and types of announcements before listening for the gist of the announcements and then identifying relevant points in the listening texts. Consciousness-raising and heightened awareness of techniques for listening conclude the lesson. The lesson incorporates the following micro-skills that Richards (1987) defined

- using real world knowledge and experience,
- detecting key words,
- recognizing the communicative functions of utterances,
- signaling comprehension or lack of comprehension verbally and non-verbally (i.e., utilizing communication strategies and body language).

Five Elements

The lesson incorporates the five elements of effective listening discussed earlier in this paper. Students must listen for orientation (i.e., the broad topic of the announcement), scan for global comprehension (e.g., differentiate announcements on a train and on a train platform), and listen for pertinent details (e.g., flight number, transfer line, non-reserved car number). These tasks reflect transferable real-world skills. The use of uni-, bi-, and multidirectional listening also increases content validity.

The activities are comprehension-based rather than memory-focused because the students perform the tasks as they listen. By utilizing the students' background knowledge during the pre-listening activities, the students can understand utterances

that may initially seem linguistically complex. During the synthesizing phase, the post-listening tasks incorporate speaking with listening. This allows the students to move from interpretive communication to interpersonal communication. In addition, it focuses the lesson on the processes of understanding and obtaining the pertinent information rather than on the information as academic answers. This task-oriented approach also enables students to develop L2 skills that are transferable to the real world, thereby teaching rather than testing.

The listening is authentic. The first two announcements are simulated authentic discourse made by a native speaker at a natural speed. The phrasing, word choice, rhythm, stress, and enunciation mimic real-world public transportation announcements. Background noise was added to increase authenticity.

Because the third and fourth announcements were recorded on a train, the unmodified authentic discourse is mutilated and sounds "hollow," like announcements often heard over public address systems. There is also naturally occurring background noise, including people talking and moving around. The third announcement is particularly difficult to hear.

Students' Reactions

During the lesson, the students appeared engaged in the activities. After the students interviewed each other to find information they had not understood, there was a class discussion. The students realized there was a comprehension breakdown for one piece of information, which only one student had understood. The students worked together to discover what had inhibited their comprehension and how one student had deciphered the pertinent content. All of the students noted the difficulty of the third announcement, but many also said they appreciated the challenge it provided.

During the wrap-up, verbal feedback was solicited from the students. Several students indicated announcements, like the recordings, are often unclear; this suggests they recognized the validity of the authentic materials. Students found the subject interesting and emphasized its practical nature as well as the fact that they had never studied anything similar to it.

Conclusion

Second language listening instruction is complex, requiring an understanding of not only the nature of listening and the two types of processing but also elements of

effective listening materials and factors that affect comprehension. Experimentation and reflection are essential so each instructor can determine what is most effective for his/her learners. Teaching listening in the L2 classroom is not, however, an “either-or” situation. Listening should be taught both as an individual skill and as an integrated part of the ability to communicate. This article summarized some of the research on listening comprehension. In a short article such as this one, it is impossible to discuss every aspect of combining theory with practical instruction, but the positive classroom results discussed in the practical application demonstrate the effectiveness of utilizing theory to meet the needs of specific students when teaching an L2.

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