Adapting Teaching to Improve Listening Instruction for a Business English Class in Japan.

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MA TEFL/TESL

Module 1: Language Teaching Methodology & Classroom Research

LT/13/05: Choose one of the four skills (reading, writing, listening and speaking). Outline the techniques that you currently use to teach this skill. Based on your reading for this Module, are there any techniques that you would now consider using? To what extent would they be suitable for your learners in your language teaching/advising context?

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1. Introduction:

This paper will examine techniques used for teaching listening to second language learners. To assess this, I will be examining the techniques I currently use to teach, practise, and test listening for a group of beginner English conversation students in Japan. The paper begins by outlining why listening was chosen for this assignment followed by a description of the group of learners examined. Section 2 will summarise the techniques currently used in class, and then examine how successful these have been. Section 3 will review the literature on teaching listening, before considering how these approaches can be utilised in my current teaching context in section 4. The essay concludes by emphasising the importance of awareness of current L2 research for making informed choices grounded in theory when designing listening lessons.

1.1 Why Listening?

Listening is an area that has traditionally been overlooked in some methods of English language teaching which focus on more productive skills such as speaking and writing (Hedge, 2000: 227-8; Nunan, 2002: 238). For example, the audiolingual approach, while viewing listening as paramount to language learning, was in fact limited in its practice of listening, advocating scripted dialogues and drills to present new target language (Hedge; 2000: 228; Flowerdew & Miller; 2005: 8). In many classrooms the focus is on listening practice and testing rather than teaching listening skills. Richards and Renandya (2002:236) postulate that a possible reason for this was the traditionally held view that listening ability could be acquired in class as learners are exposed to second language (L2) input throughout the lesson. However, listening is being seen as an ever more important skill in L2 learning (Nunan; 2002: 238), with focus on teaching learners the necessary skills and strategies necessary for comprehending spoken English.

Listening is not only a passive skill, but also an important means of acquiring new language (Rost; 2001: 7; 2005: 503). Likewise, Hedge (2000: 229) points out that

> Input gained from listening can have a key role in language acquisition, so the development of effective strategies for listening becomes important not only for oracy but also for the process of acquiring new language

It is through listening that many students are exposed to new language necessary for overall progress in their L2. If learners cannot comprehend the input they are exposed to in the

classroom, they may experience great difficulty in learning the language, thus listening can be seen as having an effect on speaking, reading and writing ability. Furthermore, listening ability is also key to participating in spoken conversation as Rost (2001: 1) points out 'there is no spoken language without listening'.

Finally, listening is the area in which I feel my students require the most instruction. Many of them lack confidence in listening, and often ask for the text to be repeated multiple times. As learners in Japan they are exposed to little authentic L2 input, and experience great difficulty in trying to understand English spoken with natural speed and intonation. Moreover, the particular group of learners examined here all list listening as the main skill areas they wish to practise, whereas many display stronger skills in reading and an aptitude for structured drills and substitution exercises.

1.2 Outline of the learners

The group consists of eight adults, aged 20-40 studying English conversation. Lessons are taught at the students' workplace lasting ninety minutes three times a month. There are six men and two women, of which seven are engineers and one a clerk. The students are set weekly homework assignments and encouraged to find opportunities to practise English outside of class. The students range in ability from beginner to lower-intermediate, however, they all suffer from low confidence and are reluctant to answer questions when unsure. The students list use of English when travelling, communicating with people from overseas, and desire to learn a new skill as their reasons for study.

2. Summary of Techniques Currently Used

The following section examines techniques I currently use to teach listening.

2.1 Lesson Framework

Table 1 below best describes the framework currently used to teach listening in class:

• **Pre-listening**
Try to anticipate any difficult vocabulary. Very little focus on establishing the scene. Set three comprehension questions. Check that students understand what they are being asked to do.
• **Listening**
The teacher reads the text. Students are then asked if they would like the text to be repeated. Learners can request to hear the text an additional two times. Students answer comprehension questions.
• **Post-listening**
Check answers to comprehension questions. Ask additional comprehension questions to ensure focus is not entirely on pre-set questions. Correct answers are praised, incorrect answers are not examined. The text is primarily seen as a means of introducing target forms therefore situational language introduced in the text is then analysed for use in speaking exercises.

Table 1: current lesson framework

This outline, based on my own initial training as an ESL teacher, shows many similarities to formats commonly used in the 1960s and 1970s as described by Field (1998: 110).

2.2 Materials

The text used for the lesson is International Express: Elementary (Taylor & Alastair, 2007), a business English textbook for beginners. Although the textbook includes listening exercises, it mostly concentrates on reading then practicing through structured drills and substitution exercises, before requiring students to produce the practised forms in role plays or less structured conversations. Listening texts are simplified rather than authentic texts, and contain few features of natural spoken language such as pauses, reformulations, and false-starts. The language focus is on grammatical structures presented through specified situations, for example, practice of modal verbs in order to understand and give travel advice.

Most of the listening texts are dialogues between two to four speakers, and often consist of interviews, telephone conversations, or situational dialogues, such as welcoming a visitor, although some monologues are included. The listening exercises are all non-participatory with the student assuming the role of silent listener. Listening comprehension is tested through matching exercises, completing tables, ticking boxes and gap-fills, to be completed individually rather than as part of a group or pair.

2.3 Presenting the listening text

It was decided that teacher modelling would be the best way to present the listening dialogues. An advantage of this is that, by using knowledge of the students' level, variations of speed, stress and intonation, as well as using longer pauses after pertinent information, over

enunciating keywords or altering pronunciation to a more familiar yet incorrect form, the difficulty of the passage could be tailored to learners' ability. For dialogues including two or more speakers, variations in tone and hand gestures are used to indicate different speakers. Clearly, this results in rather unnatural L2 input with few similarities to natural speech.

2.4 Difficulties with the current approach

The techniques described above have achieved little success in developing the learners' listening abilities. Although pre-set questions are often answered correctly the overwhelming response from students has been that listening exercises are difficult and the learners feel that they have been unable to understand the listening text. The students are often overly focussed on individual words and confidence appears to break down when even a small part of the text has not been understood, leading to frequent requests for repeated modelling at a slower speed.

Due to this lack of success in listening instruction it is clear that action needs to be taken to address the difficulties the learners are experiencing. Even a casual examination of the literature surrounding L2 listening instruction would expose flaws in my current approach which has failed to take into consideration important ideas regarding the nature of L2 listening processes and instruction. A closer examination of the underlying theories behind these processes, and an approach based on successful L2 teaching techniques is clearly necessary. In the following section we will take a closer look at this literature on L2 listening, before considering how these can be utilised in section 4.

3. Literature Review

A selection of literature on L2 listening processes and instruction is next discussed.

3.1 What is listening?

Richards and Schmidt (2010: 344) describe listening comprehension as:

> the process of understanding speech in a first or second language. The study of listening comprehension processes in second language learning focuses on the role of individual linguistic units (e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures) as well as the role of the listener's expectations, the situation and context, background knowledge and the topic.

As Rost (2005: 503) elaborates, listening is a 'complex cognitive process … encompass[ing] receptive, constructive, and interpretive aspects of cognition'. In other words, listening

involves the process of hearing what has been said, constructing these phonemes or words into longer utterances and sentences, and interpreting the speaker's intended meaning from what was heard. Listening involves two simultaneous, mutually dependent cognitive processes, namely, bottom-up and top down processes (Hedge 2000: 234-5). Bottom-up processing involves piecing together the message from the individual sounds, whereas top-down processing involves prior knowledge possessed by the listener.

3.2 Bottom-up and top-down processes in listening

3.2.1 Bottom-up processes

Bottom-up processes relate to the listeners ability to distinguish sounds heard in speech and to reconstuct the speaker's message. Flowerdew and Miller define this as follows (2005: 24):

> According to the bottom-up model, listeners build understanding by starting with the smallest units of the acoustic message: individual sounds, or phonemes. These are then combined into words, which, in turn, together make up phrases, clauses, and sentences. Finally, individual sentences combine to create ideas and concepts and relationships between them.

In other words, the overall message is built up from phonetic units, which are placed together like building blocks and constructed into words, phrases and sentences. Anderson and Lynch (1988) cited in Nunan (2002: 239), refer to this as the 'listener as tape recorder view' as the listener stores the incoming sounds in the order they are heard, much like a tape recorder. On top of this, the listener uses clues from within the text, such as a listener's lexical knowledge, knowledge of syntactic structure, and linguistic features such as stress, pauses, and enunciation to recreate the meaning of what is heard and predict what will follow (Hedge 2000: 230-1). For example, upon hearing the following extract in the news:

> In an unprecedented turn of events…

Lexical knowledge of the word *unprecedented* can be used to infer that what follows will be something out of the ordinary.

3.2.2 Top-down processes

Top-down processes on the other hand utilise 'knowledge that a listener brings to a text' (Hedge 2000: 232) to actively build a 'conceptual framework' for comprehending the text and construct meaning (Vandergrift 2004: 4). Hedge (2000: 232) further points out:

> Top down listening … infers meaning from *contextual clues* and from making links between the spoken message and various types of *prior knowledge* which listeners hold inside their heads

Contextual clues refer to the listener's situational knowledge, for example, knowledge of the speaker or setting, while prior knowledge refers to the mental frameworks readers have for different topics (ibid.). In other words, top-down processing is concerned with how listeners use knowledge they already possess, often referred to as *schemata*, to reconstruct meaning from what they hear. For example, upon hearing a friend complain about a disappointing meal at a restaurant, a listener might consider what constitutes a disappointing dining experience. Perhaps the food was bad, or the service unprofessional.

Hedge (2000: 233) lists three types of schemata used in top-down processing, namely *content schemata, formal schemata*, and *script*. Content schemata can refer to general world knowledge, sociocultural knowledge, or knowledge of the topic. Formal schemata refers to the rigid structure of some speech events, such as religious events or academic lectures. Finally, script refers to interactions where the speech follows a set pattern to some extent. For example, when buying a car the salesperson will often ask a series of set questions.

Both top-down and bottom-up processes are seen to be simultaneous, working together in an interactive model (Flowerdew & Miller, 2005: 27-8). Both linguistic information within the text and prior knowledge are used by the listener to form an understanding of what was heard. This has implications for L2 listening instruction in that both top-down and bottom-up processes will need to be taught if learners are to become competent listeners.

3.3 Difficulties in L2 listening

Listening is often regarded as one of the most challenging skills to learn and teach (Siegel 2014: 22). Learners often experience feelings of anxiety and insecurity when confronted with L2 listening, perhaps due to the fact that input must be processed in real time (Field 2008: 4). Learners may only get one chance to comprehend the text as opposed to in reading where learners can usually re-read a section if the meaning is ambiguous. Hedge (2000: 236-42) lists seven difficulties, or uncertainties that L2 listeners are faced with when trying to constuct meaning from aural input:

- Uncertainties of confidence
- Uncertainties deriving from the presentation of speech
- Uncertainties because of gaps in the message
- Uncertain strategies
- Uncertainties of language

- Uncertainties of content
- Visual uncertainties

Many learners experience difficulty trying to understand every word of a spoken text. This problem can be exacerbated as beginner listeners are often unable to automatically process what they hear and must constantly focus on details (Vandergrift 2004: 4-5). Additionally, motivation can become a problem in some classroom contexts as listening is seen as a receptive skill by some learners, leading to feelings of boredom and frustration (Goh & Taib 2006: 230). Failure to activate relevant schemata prior to listening can cause additional anxiety, therefore the teacher will need to develop confidence and foster a positive learning environment (Hedge 2000: 239).

Features of spoken language such as natural speed, intonation, the blurring of word boundaries and the fact that speech must be processed in real time can all be problematic for learners (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Lam (2002: 248-50) points out that the features of 'real-world listening input' such as the use of time-creating devices, facilitation devices, and compensation devices used to make the production of speech easier can cause problems in understanding L2 speech. Reformulations, pauses, and corrections for example, are all aspects of natural speech not typically present in written texts, therefore learners must be made aware of such features to facilitate their understanding. Gaps in the message can also be problematic. In L1, listeners can often predict or make educated guesses, whereas learners in L2 may need practice in predicting or gap-fill exercises to overcome any difficulties experienced (Hedge 2000: 238-9).

Another difficulty associated with L2 classroom instruction is the visual nature of listening. Classroom instruction often involves the use of audio recordings to provide learners with listening experience. However, in most real life listening situations the speaker is visible to the listener therefore non-verbal clues such as lip movements, gestures, and body language can be used to comprehend the speaker's message (Hedge 2000: 242). However, the use of audio recordings can provide useful listening practice for situations when the speaker is not visible, for example, talking on the telephone.

Finally, learners will need to practise and identify different purposes for listening, such as for gist, or for details which may require different processing skills. Bottom-up processes can help learners develop word recognition skills, whereas top-down processing can build real life listening skills (Vandergrift 2004: 14-5). Rost (2011: 182) lists six types of listening which learners will need to practise in order to become competent listeners:

- Intensive listening.

- Selective listening.

- Interactive listening.

- Extensive listening.

- Responsive listening.

- Autonomous listening.

Furthermore, listening may not end with the comprehension of what was said. The listener may be required to respond, therefore teachers will need to provide opportunities to practise participatory listening, as in the real world listening is rarely just reciprocal (Nunan 2002: 239-40)

3.4 Teaching Listening

Several teaching techniques will now be discussed to illustrate how teachers can help their learners to deal with listening texts.

3.4.1 Pre-listening

In the pre-teaching stage the teacher will need to activate relevant schemata to assist learners' top-down processing. Providing context can help students prepare mentally for what they are about to hear. Predicting content, discussion of topics, and forming opinions can all be used to 'set the scene'. However, caution must be taken when providing context for learners. Vandergrift (2004: 5) cites a study by Ginther (2002) demonstrating that use of context visuals to set the scene had a negative effect on comprehension, whereas content visuals, supporting the text can aid comprehension. It is also important to create motivation and elicit a purpose for listening. Providing a reason to listen, for example, making predictions about the content of the text, which students will then confirm when listening can help learners to actively engage with the text. Field (1998: 112), however, points out that teachers often spend too much time on the pre-listening stage at the expense of listening practice, and that five minutes should be sufficient to establish context and provide motivation.

3.4.2 Authentic materials

If the goal of listening instruction is to equip learners with the skills to comprehend real-life, spoken language, then authentic texts will need to be introduced to expose learners to the features of natural speech. While this can be challenging for beginner learners, simplifying the

task rather than the text when listening to authentic materials can be a motivating experience, although students must be made aware that they are not expected to understand every word (Field 2002: 244). Conversations with clear settings and role relationships can assist understanding (Hedge 2000: 245).

3.4.3 A diagnostic approach

A comprehension approach of pre-setting questions and checking for correct answers has long been criticised in much of the L2 listening literature (Field 1998: 111-2), arguing that comprehension questions merely test listening ability rather than teach it, with little or no regard to how answers were reached. However, in Japan a recent study of English instruction at tertiary institutions (Siegel 2014) found that comprehension questions are still used in the majority of listening lessons. Field (1998: 111-2) suggests that by employing a diagnostic approach to listening by following up on how answers were reached teachers can identify where comprehension broke down and focus on these areas for further instuction.

3.4.4 Listening strategies

Teaching of listening strategies, referred to here as the cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies used to compensate for gaps in knowledge, can be beneficial for less skilled learners. Listeners can be seen to also use strategies in L1 when experiencing gaps in the message, perhaps due to outside noise, therefore the goal of strategy training is to ensure that these techniques, are successfully transferred to L2 listening (Field 1998: 117). Cross (2011) reported improvements in listening comprehension for less skilled learners following a pedagogic cycle of metacognitive instruction, although more skilled learners generally showed no improvement. However, instruction in listening strategies has been criticized by some researchers, arguing that due to a lack of supporting evidence and the additional burden it places on teachers, time spent on strategy instruction would be better spent practicing listening (Renandya & Farrell 2011).

3.4.5 Subskills and intensive listening

Field (1998: 117) makes the following distinction between listening strategies and subskills:

> Subskills are seen as competencies which native listeners possess and which non-natives need to acquire in relation to the language they are learning … Strategies, by contrast, are strictly compensatory: as the listener's listening ability improves, they are required less and less.

This suggests that for long term improvements to be made, listeners must develop stronger listening subskills. He further lists three areas in which skills need to be developed: types of listening, discourse features, and techniques. Field advocates the use of dictation to help leaners develop the ability to, for example, anticipate what will come next, distinguish minimal pairs, and identify key points (1998: 114). Hedge also argues for the benefits of intensive, bottom-up listening practice in the post-listening stage of the lesson (2000: 252).

3.4.6 Extensive listening

Recent research on extensive listening has found it to have a positive effect on building comprehension (Renandya & Farrell, 2011). Renandya and Farrell argue that listening is best learnt through exposure to large amounts of interesting, enjoyable, comprehensible texts, exemplified in a study by Zhang (2005) in which middle school students engaged in extensive listening activities outperformed the control group and a group receiving listening strategies instruction. Likewise, Chang and Millet (2014) demonstrated that learners engaged in extensive listening, when coupled with extensive reading showed significant improvements in listening comprehension. Although over reliance on extensive listening has been criticised by Siegel (2011), it seems clear that it can facilitate comprehension, and is beneficial when learning other skills such as reading (Stephens, 2011).

4. Adapting the Techniques to My Current Teaching Context

From my reading, it is apparent that the techniques I currently use to teach listening outlined in section 2 are somewhat limited, and that new ideas should be incorporated into my repertoire. L2 listening literature can prove a valuable resource for teachers by helping them make informed decisions regarding the design and implementation of listening lessons. However, as all learners are individuals, and all classroom contexts different, it is necessary to adapt these techniques to suit individual learning styles and best address learners' needs.

4.1 Listening Materials

Much of the literature advocates the use of authentic materials in teaching listening, citing the need to acclimatize to listening to natural spoken English. Although it is clear that this is necessary for achieving understanding of fluent spoken English, the low level of my particular learning group could cause difficulties with this. The literature suggests activating relevant prior knowledge, informing learners that they need not understand every word, and simplifying

the task to aid comprehension. I would suggest also, that shorter authentic listening materials on simple topics should be used to prevent leaners from becoming frustrated when unable to comprehend what was said. Although there is a wealth of authentic materials suitable for more advanced learners, shorter, simpler materials may be hard to find. Eastment (2004) provides an extensive list of materials available online as well as advice on how to search for resources. Another concern is that, in changing from teacher dictated simplified listening materials, learners may experience enhanced anxiety at no longer being able to understand the spoken texts. Providing motivation and building confidence will be key to this, as well as raising awareness of the features of natural speech such as pauses and reformulations. Hedge (2000: 246) suggests that semi-authentic texts may also be used to practise listening. Accordingly, in a recent lesson, I used a semi-authentic text for listening practice, along with a simplified task which all learners completed successfully.

4.2 Listening tasks

A variety of tasks should be employed in order to keep interest and provide a range of purposes for listening. The group of learners examined focus too closely on individual words and hence need specific work on listening for global meaning. Combining listening for global meaning with authentic materials could be helpful in developing their ability to listen for gist, for example, listening to a series of short news stories conveying the content to a partner. Tasks providing learners with opportunities to listen for both gist and details, such as listening to the same text multiple times, but focussing on different information each time, and those that that require listeners to form the kind of responses required in real life listening are more effective than traditional comprehension questions (Field 2002: 244).

4.3 Strategies and skills instruction

Despite the criticisms of strategies instruction cited in section 3.4.4, it seems clear that my learners will require some form of strategy instruction to help compensate for gaps in their knowledge. Given the key role that vocabulary plays in listening comprehension (Rost 2011: 168) students with limited lexical knowledge would perhaps benefit from practicing making inferences, guessing from context, or affective strategies instruction in persevering with a difficult task. Subskills instruction suggested by Field (1998) will also be beneficial in helping learners to recognise individual words in the stream of language that they hear. White (1998) provides a good range of lesson ideas for teaching both strategies for how to become a good listener, and micro-skills practice to better understand fluent speech.

4.4 Extensive listening

Listening for pleasure may seem a rather attractive proposition, as learners will feel less anxiety knowing they are not being tested and can simply relax and enjoy the listening experience. However, extensive listening requires quite a large time commitment. In Chang and Millett's (2014) study, in addition to extensive listening, learners were required to read a whole book and complete 200 fluency questions a week. Such dedication is not feasible for my students with and family commitments. It seems that some kind of compromise is needed if extensive listening is to be included in my classroom context. I believe a more realistic target for my learners would be to initially listen to short, simple texts in class for enjoyment, before moving on to encouraging learners to listen to one or two texts a week and report back to the group. This could be something they are particularly interested in, for example a song or a film trailer.

4.5 Integration with other skills

Finally, although these learners have expressed a strong desire to improve their listening skills, the class is an English conversation class, and thus the lessons cannot consist of listening instruction alone, as other skills will need to be developed. Nunan (2002: 240) suggests that listening activities can utilise materials as 'a point of departure', where students move on from the listening task to provide their own content, for example, listening to a speech and formulating questions for the speaker, or listening to part of a story and writing an appropriate ending. This has the added benefit of making the listening participatory as well as providing further motivation by personalising the task, and seems an appropriate technique for my lessons.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined the techniques I currently use to teach listening, analysing their effectiveness, before reviewing the literature on L2 listening instruction and considering how the techniques discussed can be utilised in my classroom context. A comparison of my previous techniques for teaching listening with current theory and practice in L2 listening instruction reveal the dangers of an approach not grounded in theory. It is important to follow current research in L2 instruction, not just to understand the theories and processes in second language learning and teaching, but also to obtain new ideas and techniques that can be utilised in future lessons. An approach based on assumptions made about L2 listening processes and instruction can foster feelings of frustration, anxiety and demotivation among learners.

Teachers should therefore be flexible and understand their learners' needs and be able to adapt teaching techniques to best suit their current teaching context. Through competent listening instruction, learners can gain not only the skills to comprehend and respond to spoken language, but also access to aural input, as Vandergrift (2004: 3) points out:

> Students need to "learn to listen" so that they can better "listen to learn"

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