

# Developing an English Listening Course for Low Proficiency Japanese University Students

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## Introduction

Developing listening comprehension is vital for the success of our students. Listening is best thought of as a bundle of processes that include “recognition of the sounds uttered by the speaker, perception of intonation patterns showing information focus, interpretation of the relevance of what is being said to the current topic and so on” (Lynch & Mendelsohn, 2002, p. 193). Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002) further state that:

Traditionally, listening was viewed as a passive process, in which our ears were receivers into which information was poured, and all the listener had to do was passively register the message. Today we recognize that listening is an ‘active’ process, and that good listeners are just as active when listening as speakers are when speaking” (p. 193).

Active listening is an interpretive process which acknowledges the inherent differences in “listeners’ comprehension of what they hear, and of the importance of context and non-linguistic variables in this interpretation” (p. 194). This focus on listening as active and interpretive processes has contributed to the increase in the number of listening classes offered at Japanese universities.

To help maximize the effectiveness of listening courses taught in Japanese universities, teachers need to begin with an underlying theory of the process

of listening. This theory will then shape the instructional principles of the listening course. Derived from the instructional principles is the course rationale. The course rationale factors in the roles of the participants and their needs and the course aims and objectives. After specifying the course rationale, course content can be addressed. The content includes the skill areas covered and to what degree, the method of organization, and the sequencing of subject matter. Finally, five sample listening activities designed for Japanese university students and based on the underlying theory, instructional principles, and course rationale will be demonstrated. Using the framework above, I shall describe how I would teach a listening class to Japanese university students studying English.

### **Theory of Listening**

What is the underlying theory of listening? I do not think that there is one theory that can encompass the process of listening in its entirety. Cognitive theory, however, does justify the main instructional principle I shall use to teach this listening course.

In cognitive theory, learners-whether learning their first or second language-are mentally active and dynamic during the learning process. They select from incoming information what they wish to understand or remember, relate it to prior knowledge, store the selected information in memory, and use various procedures for remembering it when needed. (Chamot, 1995, p. 16)

Cognitive learning theories recognize three kinds of memory in information processing (Chamot, 1995). According to Chamot (1995), the information is initially assessed through auditory and/or visual receptors and enters the short-term or immediate memory, the capacity of which is extremely limited. By selectively perceiving aspects of the information in the short-term memory,

we are able to place some of this information into our working memories for further processing. While in the working memory, the information “needs to be manipulated in some way if it is to survive long enough for storage in and future retrieval from long-term memory” (p. 16).

There are two types of long-term memory available for information storage: declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge. “Declarative knowledge, which includes concepts, vocabulary, and images, is stored as related propositions and schematic networks. Procedural knowledge, which includes both physical and cognitive skills and strategies, is stored as production systems consisting of linked condition and action sequences” (p. 16). Declarative and procedural knowledge are interdependent but distinct. For instance, the act of listening, a procedural skill, “can be used to acquire new declarative knowledge” (p. 16).

Procedural knowledge is important because it underlies cognitive skills, which need repeated practice to become automatized. Automatized skills do not need to be focused on in working memory, allowing one to devote attention to new information. Gagne, Yekovich, and Yekovich (as cited in Chamot, 1995) claim that it is desirable for these cognitive skills to become automated, while strategies should remain consciously controlled in order “to maintain awareness of different learning conditions and select the strategies most appropriate for specific tasks” (p. 16).

Thus, from the point of view of cognitive theory, language comprehension is “an active process in which meaning is constructed through a complex interaction between the characteristics of the input, the types of declarative knowledge that are accessed, and the use of strategic processes to enhance understanding” (p. 16).

## Instructional Principles

From cognitive theory, I derive the instructional principle of teaching learning strategies. According to Kasper and Kellerman (as cited in Rost, 2002), any expertly performed behavior involves planning and the use of appropriate strategies. Therefore, teachers should identify, model, and practice the strategies associated with expert performance in order to improve language acquisition (Rost, 2002). Rost (2002) outlines the following principles to support the teaching of learning strategies:

1. Consistent use of learning strategies helps students learn more efficiently.
2. Language use strategies can enable students to handle tasks that may be more difficult than their current processing might allow. This ‘stretch’ of capacity can be instructive to learners, and may motivate them to learn more.
3. Learning strategies that are associated with successful learners can be demonstrated and modeled for less successful learners. (p. 112)

ESL/EFL students can employ learning strategies to improve listening comprehension. In fact, Lynch and Mendelsohn (2002) claim that, “Strategy instruction is at the root of teaching learners how to tackle a listening text” (p. 206). In a study of ESL students in America by O’Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (as cited in Chamot, 1995), effective students made use of different strategies when listening than less effective students. In the initial stage of listening comprehension, these less effective students were unable to focus their attention on the most relevant information for processing. During the second stage, less effective learners looked for meaning on a word-by-word basis rather than guessing meanings from the context. In the last stage, these learners did not use their prior knowledge to aid comprehension or recall of the listening passage.

Nagano (as cited in Chamot, 1995) also looked at the use of strategies employed by effective and less effective listeners studying English in Japanese

high schools. Nagano found that less effective listeners were unable to distinguish word boundaries in streams of English speech. “This difficulty greatly reduced the amount of information they were able to process initially, thus making less information available for constructing meaning” (p. 17). Effective listeners were skilled at directing their attention to the language input, “and thus had a body of information on which to employ strategies to assist comprehension” (p. 17).

In addition to listening strategies, a second instructional principle I will utilize in this course is autonomy. At the heart of this principle is the concept of control. Teachers should encourage their students “to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it” (Richards & Schmidt, 2002, p. 297). Benson (as cited in Rost, 2002, p. 165) states that autonomy involves the following hypotheses:

1. Autonomy in learning is natural and available to all.
2. Autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning.
3. Autonomy is exhibited to different degrees by different individuals in different situations.
4. Learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and preparations.
5. The ways in which we organize teaching and learning exercise an important influence on the development of autonomy among our learners.

Furthermore, with a limited amount of time to spend with the students during the semester, autonomy becomes very important. Should the students strive for improved language acquisition, then much of the work will need to be done outside of class. Promoting autonomy encourages students to take control of the learning process and to study on their own.

### **Course Rationale**

After establishing the instructional principles, I can address the course

rationale. There are typically 20-25 freshmen or sophomore students per 90 minute listening class in universities in Japan. The proficiency level of the majority of students that I envision teaching is low. The students take English classes as requirements, so their motivation to study tends to be low as well. Within a class, teachers may have beginner level Chinese students with little prior English experience. At the other extreme, there may be returnees with high levels of proficiency. Since most students have low English proficiency, their confidence and their self-esteem in English courses tend to suffer.

With a general idea of the number, the degree of motivation, and the proficiency levels of the students, I can more methodically analyze their needs. "In general terms, needs analysis...refers to the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group" (Brown, 1995, p. 35). To perform a thorough needs analysis, teachers should gather as much information about the students as possible. Speaking to students (both future and prior), other English listening teachers at the university, and administrators will help identify student needs. Teachers will also likely find existing information in ESL/EFL literature and in the internal records of the school helpful (Brown, 1995). The bulk of my information, however, comes from consultations with other teachers and by looking at the materials they use in class. Many instructors of listening courses have identified the following problems in their Japanese students: poor listening strategy use, an inability to comprehend native speakers, and a difficulty distinguishing between similar sounds. The input of fellow teachers provides a great deal of information regarding student attitudes, abilities, problem areas, proficiency, and motivation and should be taken advantage of. After gathering the information, I will concentrate the results of my needs analysis first in terms of learning processes and then of linguistic content.

"The learning process position leans toward needs specified from a situation

needs perspective; these tend to be more subjectively analyzed needs in the affective domain, such as motivation and self-esteem” (p. 41). My needs analysis of the students identifies the importance of increasing their confidence and their motivation. The emphasis, therefore, is on creating enjoyable classes in a relaxed, friendly atmosphere, thus providing the best opportunity for language acquisition. Allowing students opportunities to choose or influence what they will study promotes autonomy. As Cohen and Dornyei (2002) state, “there is a consensus that autonomy and motivation go hand in hand” (p. 175).

After considering the students’ affective needs, I will address the students’ linguistic content needs. According to Brown (1995), “The linguistic content position tends to favor needs analyzed objectively from a language needs perspective and spelled out in linguistic terms, whether they be phonemes, morphemes, grammatical structures, case rules, utterances, functions, notions, discourse markers, or whatever” (p. 41). I shall organize the linguistic content needs around functions, such as greetings, talking about interests, etc. Within each function, we will address areas of student weakness identified, in part, by previous listening course instructors. The functions chosen will also determine the vocabulary and grammar most helpful for completing listening or communication tasks.

An additional element of the course rationale is the overall aims and objectives of the course. Introductory listening courses are required and the aims somewhat modest. Some students, particularly freshmen, may not have had exposure to native speaking (non-Japanese) English teachers. As a result, the main purpose of the course is for the students to become comfortable with native speakers of English. Teachers are encouraged to pay special attention to the affective needs of their students. Classes should be enjoyable, motivating, and taught at a level that is appropriately challenging. Consequently, a key goal for all of my classes will be to have fun and to encourage the students to do their best. By keeping the class enjoyable, I hope

to pique their interest in English and to instill a sense of confidence that will promote further study at the university or on their own. The instructional objectives, which are “the particular knowledge, behaviors, and/or skills that the learner will be expected to know or perform at the end of a course,” are derived from the student weaknesses identified in the needs analysis (Brown, 1995, p.73). The objectives will address learner deficiencies in listening strategy use, increase their comprehension of native speakers, and help them to differentiate between similar sounds.

### **Course Content**

Next, I will turn my attention to the course content. Even though it is described as a listening class, I will include other macroskills to varying degrees. The proficiency level of most students is low; so, they will need a lot of comprehensible listening input. I anticipate that 40% of the class will consist of listening activities, 30% of speaking activities, 20% of grammar and vocabulary study, and the remaining 10% will focus on reading.

As stated earlier, the method of organization will be a functional syllabus. However, I want to give the students some control over the functions we cover. Some of the functions will come from the interests of the students. The class will brainstorm lists of typical student activities and choose the most popular ones, which I will then turn into functions that support my syllabus. (I anticipate functions such as inviting friends to an izakaya, dating, and talking about interests to be typical examples that students may chose.) Also, after the first day of class, I expect the students to fill-out an index card (for homework) with their picture and biographical information, a portion of which will include the students’ interests, hobbies, and likes. This source may provide additional information that can be used to create functions.

The functions chosen and university academic guidelines will drive the



sequence of the course content. This listening course consists of only 12 classes per semester. The students are allowed to miss as many as three classes, or more in special cases, without fear of failing. As a result, many students choose to attend the bare minimum number of classes needed in order to pass. Each class will consist of one function which can be completed even if the students failed to attend prior classes or plan on skipping subsequent ones. I realize that this arrangement is less than ideal, but the sporadic attendance makes achieving overall course continuity very difficult. By giving students the freedom to choose some of the course content, I hope to have classes that interest the students and, therefore, increase the likelihood they will attend.

In order to improve listening comprehension, the individual listening activities that I derive from the functions will be taught in three phases: pre-listening, listening, and post-listening.

During the pre-listening phase, we will work on top-down strategies to activate schema because “students should be ‘tuned-in’ so that they know what to expect, both in general and for specific tasks” (Underwood, as cited in Rost, 2002, p. 142). One useful technique to accomplish this is to brainstorm vocabulary. I avoid pre-teaching vocabulary from any dialogues used, however, unless the words are critical to understanding the text. In real world situations, students “cannot expect unknown words to be explained in advance; instead, they have to cope with situations where part of what is heard will not be familiar” (Field, 2002, p. 243). I want the students to become comfortable with the realization that they may not know every word used in conversation and to develop strategies to handle unknown vocabulary. If the learners are comfortable, they may be more willing to guess the meaning of the text from the words they do understand. A second pre-listening technique to activate schema is speculation. By using pictures, video, or other means, students (individually or more likely in small groups) speculate about what they will

hear. A third possible technique is a brief discussion of a topic related to the listening text; this discussion will be student-led and in small groups. Finally, I will give the students comprehension questions or tasks in order to create a purpose for listening.

After activating schema in the pre-listening phase, I will teach strategies to use in the listening phase to aid comprehension. Though the students are low proficiency, I hope to incorporate some authentic texts, such as recordings of spontaneous speech. I do agree with Field (2002) that students may find understanding part(s) of authentic speech to be motivating. One strategy to aid comprehension of authentic texts is to encourage risk-taking. Students should be encouraged to guess the meaning of unknown vocabulary and to make inferences based on the words they do understand (Field, 2002). I will also introduce strategies to cope with relaxed pronunciation. Students will need to learn some of the more common examples of relaxed pronunciation like *wanna*, *gonna*, *hafta*, etc. This is particularly important if the students have had no prior experience with a native speaking English teacher. An ability to discriminate between phonemes is a third strategy to develop. Distinguishing between similar sounds often causes listening comprehension problems. Finally, I will check the students' ability to listen for both main ideas and specific information, to infer, and to predict.

The last phase is post-listening. The listening text can act as a springboard for other activities. For example, the students can role play the dialogues, create scenarios about what happened before or after the dialogue, report what occurred in the dialogue, etc. The post-listening phase allows for student output and should help them to strengthen their interlanguage by noticing the gap between their productions and those of more capable speakers (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

## Sample Teaching Activities

The following five listening activities are consistent with my underlying theory of listening, my instructional principles and course rationale, and can be taught in three phases. Helgesen and Brown's (1997) textbook, *Active Listening: Introducing Skills for Understanding, Student's Book*, provides many useful listening dialogues. In the pre-listening phase, pairs of students look at pictures and speculate about what will be said. During the listening phase, students listen to the dialogues for different purposes: initially to understand the main idea, then to find specific information, and finally to listen "between the lines." After listening to the dialogues, pairs of students will role play the various situations in the post-listening phase. The textbook promotes autonomy with extensive pair work, has texts based on functions geared toward lower proficiency learners, and focuses on strategy use. I especially like the listen "between the lines" section which encourages use of the strategy of inferring. Students who have acquired abilities to listen for main ideas, to identify specific information, and to infer will be able to improve their listening comprehension.

A second textbook I will use listening examples from is Weinstein's (1982) *Whaddaya Say?*. In these dialogues, the emphasis is on understanding relaxed speech and reduced forms. According to Brown (2001), "reductions pose significant difficulties, especially for classroom learners who may have initially been exposed to the full forms of the English language" (p. 253). Because the students I will teach are mostly low proficiency and likely unfamiliar with reduced forms, some modifications to Weinstein's dialogues may be necessary. For instance, I may need to shorten the length of the dialogue or cut the number of phonological reductions used. The dialogues do, however, deal with concepts, such as inviting, that are appropriate for the proficiency level of this class. In the pre-listening phase, a student-led discussion of popular places to

invite someone out for a date will help activate schema, for example. Students can also work together in pairs to match common phonological reductions to their full forms. In the listening phase, strategies for comprehending reduced forms and identifying word boundaries are stressed. During the post-listening phase, students can role play the dialogue or rewrite the dialogue using full forms. Again, when using Weinstein's dialogues, I emphasize pair or small group work throughout in order to promote autonomy. Students who have been exposed to natural sounding English, complete with reductions, are likely to improve their listening comprehension.

A third activity I will use helps in discriminating between individual phonemes. Japanese university students are likely to face greater difficulties with bottom-up listening skills than with top-down listening skills (D. Beglar, Eng Ed 645 lecture, April 8, 2005). By using minimal pairs with street names (Greenfield, 1994, p. 219), students can practice producing and recognizing specific phonemes as they give and receive directions to locations on a map. In a teacher-fronted, pre-listening activity, students will listen and identify which word from a minimal pair is spoken. During the listening phase, students will follow directions that I give them in order to identify specific locations on the map. As a post-listening activity, the students will give and receive directions using Greenfield's map. Giving and understanding directions readily lends itself to pair work, promoting autonomy. Moreover, recognizing and differentiating between the sounds of individual phonemes is a necessary strategy to develop listening comprehension.

A fourth listening activity, developed by Beglar (2005), encourages students to draw conclusions. I feel that most textbooks provide listening texts that do not require students to draw conclusions based upon what they have heard. Instead, they typically ask students to listen for specific pieces of information in order to answer questions about a passage. Communication, however, often requires strategies that a listener can use to accurately draw conclusions about

a speaker's intentions. Using Beglar's (2005) BMW dialogue as a guideline for teaching the strategy of drawing conclusions, pairs of students in the pre-listening phase discuss the kind of car they would buy if they had unlimited funds. Afterward, during the listening phase, the pairs are given comprehension questions and then told to listen to a dialogue in which the speakers address the advantages and disadvantages of two models of cars. The speaker in the dialogue never explicitly states which type of car or car options he will choose; the students must draw the correct conclusions. The post-listening phase will be a convincing activity. Two students will debate about which car to buy: the cheaper model or the more expensive one. Students who have developed strategies to draw conclusions will enhance their listening comprehension.

The final listening activity is a paused prediction task in which students predict the outcomes of a story. After 60-90 seconds of listening, students' short-term memories may become taxed (Rost, 2002). Rost (2002) suggests that because of the limitations of short-term memory, one minute of listening text may be ideal for teaching new skills and strategies. "By pausing the spoken input (the tape or the teacher) and allowing for some quick intervention and response, we in effect 'slow down the listening process' to allow the listeners to monitor their listening more closely" (Rost, 2002, p. 145). I will pause after every 15-30 seconds of input to ensure that low proficiency students can complete the task. The pre-listening phase of the task will consist of a small group discussion of the students' favorite childhood stories or fairytales. During the listening phase, I will pause four times as I tell the story. The groups of students then predict what will happen next and also provide an ending for the story. In the post-listening phase, students will change groups and report and compare their stories. By allowing students to "monitor their listening more closely" and to make predictions, listening comprehension will improve.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, cognitive theory provides a solid theoretical foundation upon which to create an effective listening course for Japanese university students. From cognitive theory, the main instructional principle of teaching learning strategies is justified. A second instructional principle that further promotes language acquisition is learner autonomy. These two principles form the core of the listening course and shape the course rationale. The course rationale describes the students, meets their affective and linguistic needs, and sets out overall course aims and objectives. The five classroom listening activities, organized within a functional syllabus, promote the use of listening strategies and stress the importance of learner autonomy in order to improve listening comprehension. Students should begin to develop listening strategies to help them distinguish between phonemes. Building upon these strategies, students can then work on ways to cope with the phonological reductions present in natural speech. In addition to these bottom-up skills, learners also need listening strategies that further their abilities to predict, draw conclusions, understand the main idea, identify specific information, and listen between the lines. Courses designed with these strategies in mind and taught in a classroom that promotes autonomy will greatly advance listening comprehension.

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