

An Analysis of Listening Comprehension

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1. Introduction

Until recently, listening had been a neglected art in language teaching. It had been assumed that speaking was the active process in language function, and if this was achieved, the conclusion was that it was well taught. On the other hand, listening was considered only an adjunct to speaking, and thus it was least taught.

Is it correct then to maintain that listening may be regarded as a passive skill? This notion is confuted by Rivers as follows;

. . . the phrase “as they understand it” is basic because listening is not a passive but an active process of constructing a message from a stream of sound with what one knows of the phonological, semantic, and syntactic potentialities of the language. (1)

Unlike listening to his mother tongue, a person, when he is in a communication situation of a foreign language, must use knowledge of the phonology, lexicon, and grammar of that language. He/she is certainly struggling to make what is being said explicit by applying that knowledge. In this sense it seems natural, as Rivers stated, to consider that listening has an active phase.

It is noteworthy that listening skill has been evaluated and methods to improve it have been developed these days. Also investigation in listening is one of the recent trends in English language pedagogy. As we know, JACET (Japan Association of College English Teachers) had worked on this subject for years and projected a listening comprehension test. At our college we use this test to evaluate a student’s listening ability. That also feeds back to us for considering materials for better improvement in listening skill.

Here I’d like to present data obtained from JACET Listening Comprehension Test and discuss some aspects concerned with listening ability.

2. Performance

The purpose in this chapter is to present some findings from this test on problems of reception. Data provided is not sufficient to affirm everything just at this moment. Therefore I will point up assumptions only and I hope to validate them in a continuous study.

2.1. Test construction

Before showing the tables, it is necessary to explain the forms of the Listening Comprehension Test briefly. The test is organized in three parts. Each form and its aim are as follows:

Part I: true or false type test. The aim is to identify contextual relationship between two utterances.

Part II: same or different type test. The aim is to identify the paraphrase relationship between two utterances.

Part III: multiple choice type test. The aim is to check passage comprehension.

Twenty questions are given in PART I and II, and ten questions, in PART III. It should be known also that JACET offers two parallel tests called Form A and Form B. Form A is given in June, and B in December.

2.2 Proficiency and learning time reallion

Table 1 shows the average performance rate of each part and the whole. Performance rate was calculated by the following formula.

$$\frac{\text{total number of correct answers}}{\text{total number of each part} \times \text{number of students}} \times 100$$

Table 1.

	Juniors (29)	Seniors (31)		Juniors (29)	Seniors (31)
Part I	52.2 %	61.4 %	Part I	60.9 %	67.6 %
Part II	58.8 %	68.3 %	Part II	69.1 %	64.8 %
Part III	52.7 %	69.4 %	Part III	51.7 %	67.7 %
average rate	54.6 %	66.4 %	average rate	57.2 %	66.7 %

It is obvious at first sight that the performance of seniors is much higher than taht of juniors. Then, when did seniors attain this handsome improvement? Table 2 illustrates their growth stages of performance in average rate over a two-year period.

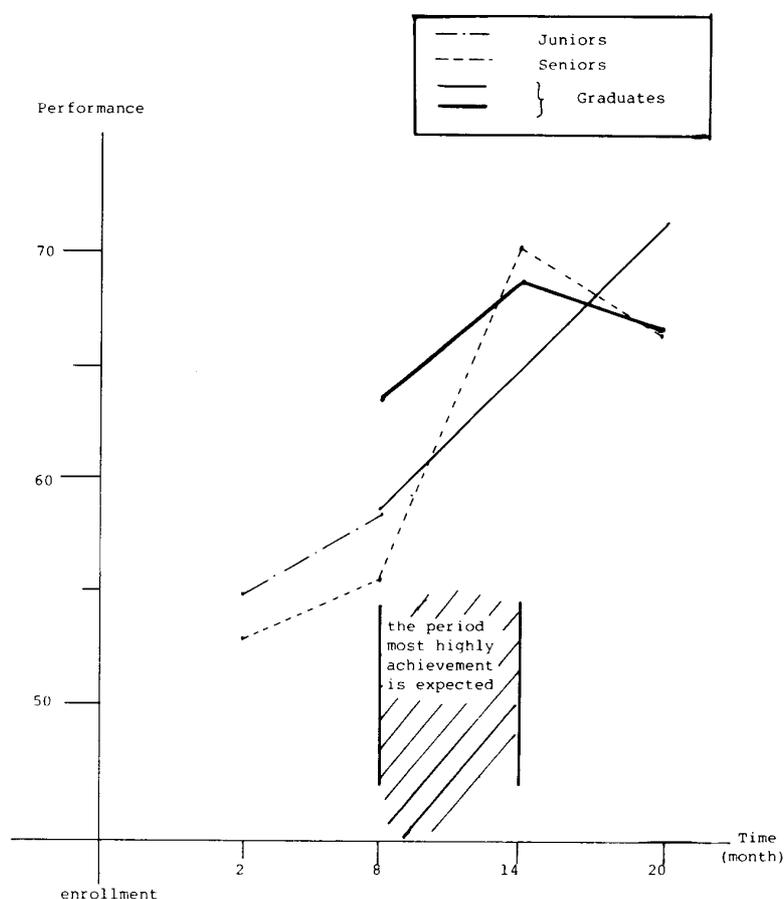
Table 2.

Date	June 1980 (A)	December 1980 (B)	June 1981 (A)	December 1981 (B)
Performance rate	52.9 %	55.5 %	70.1 %	66.4 %

Fortunately data of graduates from 1978 to 1980 are available. See graph 1 below.

As six-month term checks have begun only since June, 1980, data of graduates does not tell exact starting point. It is supposed, however, that within 2 to 8 months after enrollment *radical* growth is not expected, as students seem to achieve only *gradually* during this period. Then within 8 to 14 months, students' listening ability is improved remarkably. High rate of performance at graduate time results from the fact that achievement in a foreign language is primarily based on the amount of time spent studying that language.

GRAPH 1



However, traces indicate the necessity of further consideration on the following assumption: listening ability improves in a certain period, but it changes slightly after making that progress.

The following is an interesting report presented by Paul Pimsleur. He investigated the relationship between improvement of listening ability and memory. He said that students' memory span for foreign language attained to half of their mother tongues in a pretty short time after they started to learn that language. But improvement after that was enormously slow. (2)

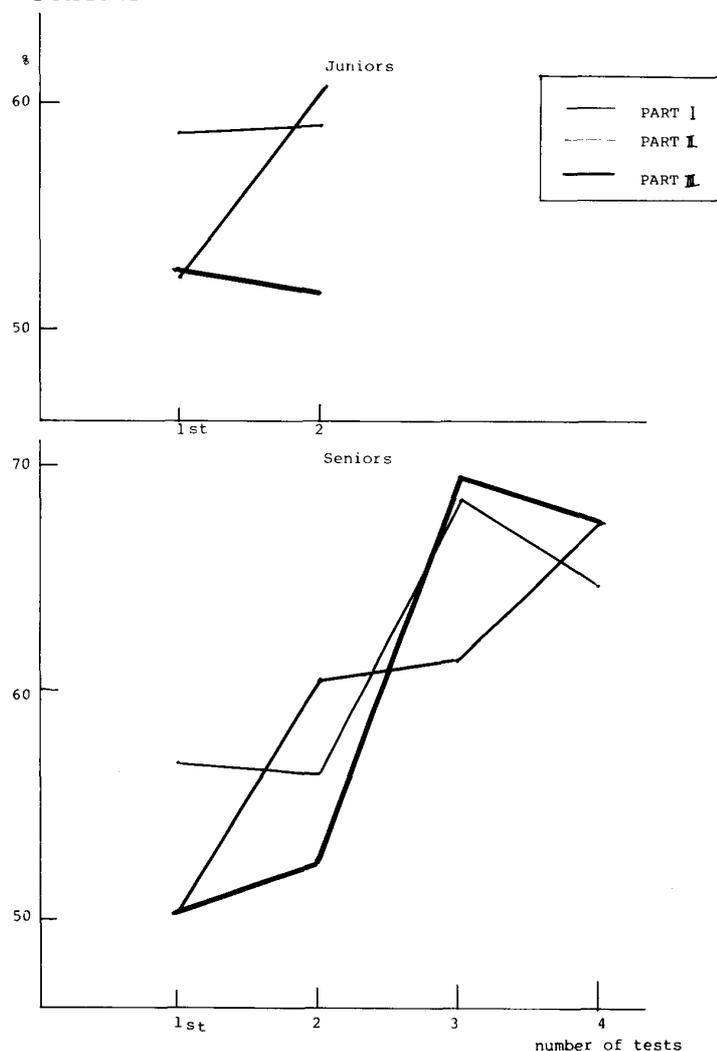
As far as diminished returns are concerned, some non-linguistic factors are considered in relation to students' conditions at that time. It may be that the difference in parallel tests I mentioned above may affect the performance rate. However, it is more important for us to account for how the proficiency of performance relates to learning time and what affects the improvement of listening ability. Memory is one factor as Pimsleur suggests, but I think there are still other factors which we can investigate and consider.

2.3. Improvement in three types of comprehension test

The next dimension in discussing performance is that of the growth rate in each part. At enrollment time, performance of both juniors and seniors shows the degrees of difficulty, ranking PART I as most difficult, PART III, second and PART II, the least. As a matter of fact, there is no significant difference in proportion between PART I and III. How does it change after six months have passed? Graph 2 shows the changes in performance.

Needless to say, the improvement of performance in PART I is striking. The performance in PART III, on the contrary, moves little upwards. So does it in PART II. As the graph shows, the performance in each part improved enormously within a year after the first test was taken. But it is only in this kind of short utterance comprehension that students can attain ability in a pretty short period. The longer the utterance, the longer does it take students to get used to its comprehension. Rivers has commented on this problem related with retention.

GRAPH 2



. . . the listener is drawing out from the communication those elements which seem to express the purpose of the speaker or those which suit his own purposes. This he can do at first only with short utterances. Extracting relevant facts from a communication occupies some of the capacity of the organism and he also has to hold some of these facts in his immediate memory in order to relate them to other facts. This act of suspended judgement temporarily reduces his capacity for taking in more information. With a long sequence, what are to him still high-information items are emitted in quick succession and he has not sufficient capacity to absorb them. As a result some of them pass unregistered and he misses the point of what he has heard. Alternatively, having misinterpreted some high-information items near the beginning of the sequence he wrongly anticipates the intent of the message, selects accordingly, and does not absorb other elements which were important to the purposes of the speaker. As his familiarity with the language increases through the teaching he is receiving in all skill areas, these difficulties will be reduced and he will be able to follow and retain longer and longer sequences. (3)

A doubt might arise that the growth rate in PART II is also expected as it is in PART I according to this theory, since utterances in both parts have almost the same length. Let us examine this problem. As it is known, the primary concern of listening comprehension is to interpret utterances as meaningful. S.P. Corder emphasizes the identification with grammatical/semantic competence in which the questions of PART I and II are concerned.

It is not sufficient merely to identify utterances as grammatical. In linguistic terms, we have to internalize not the grammatical but also the 'lexical' rules. These rules, as we saw, have to do with the semantic structure of the language, with its internal 'sense relations'. Utterances could be either grammatically or semantically unacceptable. Identification, therefore, is the process of recognizing utterances as grammatically and semantically well-formed.

It is at this point that I must introduce again the frequently-heard remark: I understand what you say, but I don't know what you mean. We can interpret this in the light of what has been said so far. It could be phrased as: I identify your utterance as well-formed according to the rules of the language, but I do not understand it. (4)

In this test students do not have in mind grammatical identification of each utterance since utterances are given with grammatically well-structured forms. The problem is *meaning relationship*.

A very applicable comment can be found in River's explanation about stages of development of listening comprehension.

The student next passes through a stage when he recognizes familiar elements in the mass of speech but is unable to recognize the interrelationship within the whole stream of sound; this again is not full comprehension. He feels rather like a man walking in a fog which clears in patches and floats back to obscure other points. It is only with much practice that he can pass beyond this stage. As he hears much foreign-language speech, he eventually acquires facility in recognizing the crucial elements which determine the message. (5)

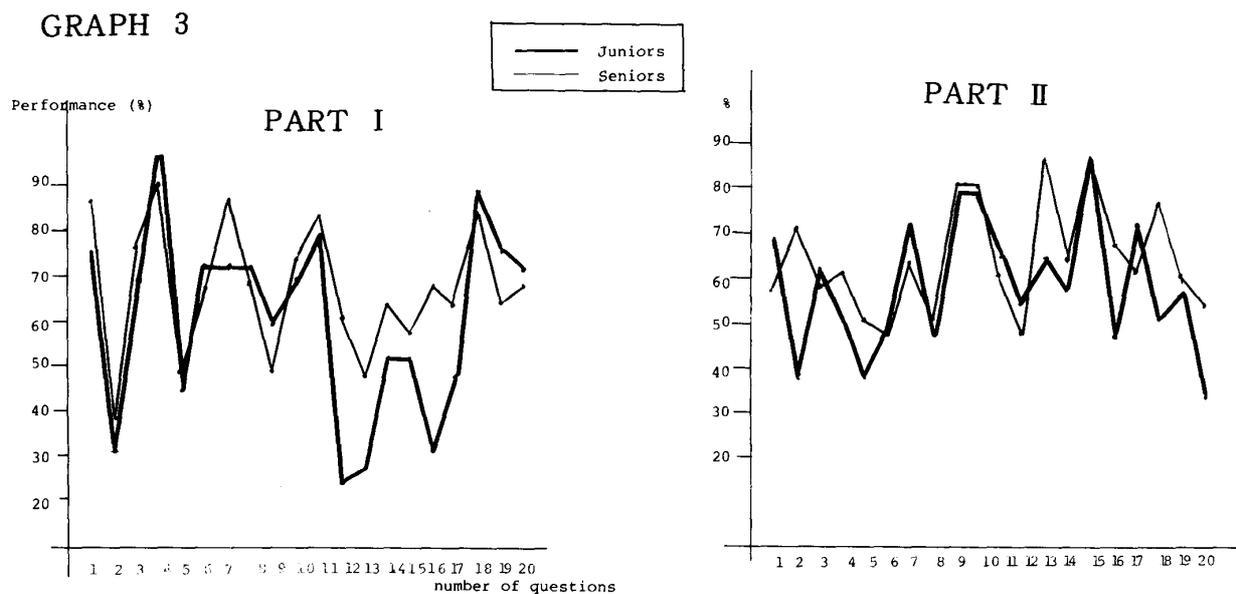
The different feature between PART I and II is that the former must be concerned with the context of two utterances, the latter, on the other hand, relates out of context,

but with the identification of meaning among utterance interrelations. It is obvious that in paraphrase identification awareness of structures works largely as a clue to get the meaning of each utterance. But, in this chapter I'd like to take into account the attainability of comprehension according to the test type rather than the affections by syntactical knowledge.

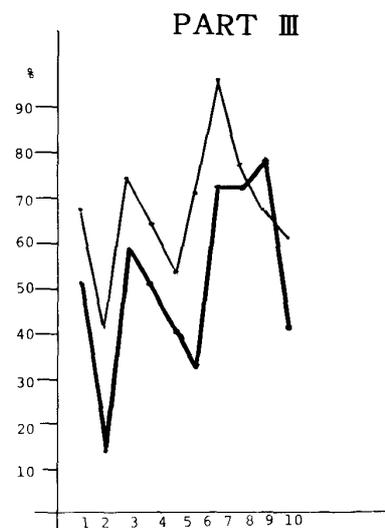
Now let me summarize the connection between the characteristics of the three types of comprehension test and improvement of ability in time relation. Firstly, context helps to have students get more easily accustomed to construe meaning with the help of the context. Next comes the identification of paraphrase relations among utterances. Even if students recognize the structures of the utterances, they still feel difficulty to hold them and relate them as meaningful. Lastly, the longer sequences make students' comprehension ability least improved. Although, in the case of passage comprehension, context plays an important role to grasp what is being spoken, students do not easily make use of the context because too much information is involved in longer sequences, and the result is that they can't hold and draw out the necessary message.

2.4 Degrees of difficulties

Lastly, I want to present a very interesting phase in this test. See graphs below.



These illustrate performance rate of question in each part. Although irregularity in performance is obviously marked in sight, questions of high performance for juniors are likewise so for seniors. On the other hand, low performance is observed on the same questions to which both juniors and seniors responded. The data is pretty reliable on this point. The same result occurred in every previous test. This implies that the problems internalized for a particular question are common for students regardless of years. This means that questions felt to be difficult by students have common factors which hinder proficiency. I won't refer to the causes here, but these will be taken up in a continuous study following this one.



3. Factors which affect listening comprehension

In the previous chapter I analyzed performance based on the point of reception. Reception is deeply connected with the semantic interpretation. However, we should keep in mind the three stages in order to decode the spoken message. These are concerned with what Rivers states as 'phonological, semantic, and syntactic potentialities of the language'.

What is the constituent of a message? The unit of a message which conveys meaning in the utterance might be a word, a phrase, or a rather higher sequence. But the message is transmitted with *sounds*. Pit Corder uses the term 'double articulation of the language' to explain this relation between sound and structure.

Double Articulation . . . the secondary articulation being the organization of the sound resources of the language to make manifest or 'realize' the semantic and syntactic structure of sentences. Learning a language must therefore also involve learning the rules governing the organization of sounds in the target language. (6)

Sounds realized in various phonetic environments are decoded by the phonological knowledge of students. Especially for Japanese students, it affects a big difference in the listening ability to recognize some English phonemes which are not involved in the Japanese sound system. This applies to the items of the suprasegmental level like intonation.

Apparently, success in this learning task depends on success in remembering identities of the sounds. It seems obvious that phonetic coding ability is demanded in the learning of a foreign language because the individual must not only learn the identities

of the new phonemes of that language, but must also recognize and remember the phonetic sequences presented by the morphemes, words, and intonation contours of that language. (7)

After receiving sounds, operation to group them into a grammatical and meaningful unit is done by the knowledge of lexicon and syntax. This stage is usually called identification.

Just as the speaker, in generating his message, is working on a number of different levels at the same time, so the listener in reconstructing it has to work on the same levels and, like the speaker, he works on them all at the same time. This means that, as the message is coming in, the listener is forming the phoneme string, cementing it into morphemes and forming the morpheme string, reconstructing the word sequence and thus building up the sentence. (8)

Phonological unit itself is not meaningful, but grammatical and lexical items are since they are the units related to meaning. In this sense students with a wide range of vocabulary or an awareness of structures are certainly considered to have fluency in listening comprehension.

. . . the identification of spoken sounds as words is partly dependent upon the listener's recognition (or prediction) of the grammatical structure of the utterance he is 'processing'. (9)

Leeson, in the same way, suggests the units of decoding categorized into two functions, minimal unit level and higher order segmentation. (10)

Now I have described briefly linguistic factors which affect proficiency in listening comprehension. It seems impossible to state performance without thinking of how a student's knowledge of language relates to it.

4. Conclusion

The growth rate of performance presented above implies that students have gotten skills in areas related to linguistic knowledge in a language learning activity. They comprehend utterances through recognition of sounds, identification of words and structures, using phonological and syntactical knowledge, and finally receive the message in semantic interpretation. Furthermore, as we have seen, on reception, not only linguistic knowledge, but other factors like auditory memory or ability to cooperate with complex information are involved.

A listening comprehension test is a means to grasp a condition on how well a student performs with integrated linguistic competence. For further study it will be necessary to extract data about each linguistic knowledge in contrast with performance. Thus, the assumptions stated in chapter 2 will be more clarified in those examinations.

Notes

1. W.M. Rivers and M.S. temperley, *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 63.
2. Paul Pimsleur, “Kititori Noryoku ni okeru Aru Sokumen,” in *Eigo Kyoiku Kougaku Shuyo Bunken So Sakuin*, 6, edited by H. Suzuki (Tokyo: Kenkyusha, 1975), pp. 162–165.
3. W.M. Rivers, *Teaching Foreign-Language Skills* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), p. 143.
4. S.P. Corder, *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1973), p. 121.
5. W.M. Rivers, Op. Cit., p. 141.
6. S.P. Corder, p. 245.
7. J.B. Carroll, “Implications of aptitude test research and psycholinguistic theory for foreign language teaching, ” in *Colloquium 15: Achievements and prospects in the application of psycholinguistics to the teaching of foreign language*, 1971.
8. D.B. Fry, “Speech Reception and Perception,” in *New Horizons in Linguistics* edited by John Lyons (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1970), p. 49.
9. John Lyons, p. 261.
10. R. Leeson, *Fluency and Language Teaching* (London: Longman, 1975), pp. 84–87.