A Study of Listening Tasks in Terms of Language Content and Language Processing

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1. Introduction

Listening ability of foreign language learners is generally less than that of their first language because of various disadvantages, such as limited storage capacity of short-term memory, restricted linguistic knowledge, and lack of background knowledge. These factors easily bring the second-language learner's processing capacities to his or her limits, a phenomenon known as task-overload. The 'Listening task' can be used as an efficient exercise in the classroom for developing students' listening abilities. At the same time, conventional listening courses consisting only of multiple-choice questions after listening to materials spoken with an unnatural speed and printed in the text do not seem to be effective. They cannot provide learners, particularly non-advanced learners, with appropriate listening training; learners cannot acquire listening skills or strategies to compensate for the above disadvantages in language processing. In recent years, commercially published textbooks consisting of various types of listening tasks have become available; however, many of them do not seem designed to help learners to develop listening abilities applicable to a real-life situations. We need to make students familiar with various types of speech and provide them with appropriately graded exercises for teaching how to listen to foreign language efficiently.

A previous study by the author has shown what elements should be involved in the listening task to make it effective particularly for training of low-intermediate level learners (Tsuchimochi, 1999). Listening tasks should be appropriately designed and graded in terms of input and task-type according to the learners' level and objectives of the course so that students can practice language content and language processing with accompanying developmental growth in proficiency. This issue will be investigated further by examining the particular listening task itself. In this paper, I will examine two different types of listening tasks in terms of 'language content' of input and 'language processing' likely to be encouraged by the listening task, in order to discuss more specifically what kind of features should be taken into account for the selection of effective listening tasks

appropriate to the level and purpose of the target learners. First, brief description of two tasks will be given. Second, aspects of the language content of each task will be examined and compared. Third, likely language processing shall be discussed through an examination of each listening task. Lastly, suggestions for teaching listening will be proposed on the basis of these observation.

2. Brief Description of Two Different Listening Tasks

This paper deals with the 'Shopping centre' and 'Job interviews' and begins with a brief description of these two listening tasks.

The 'Shopping centre' listening task is a variation of 'Ground-plans' which are a kind of map-task, and a sketch of the floor of this task type can be used for various different listening tasks (Ur, 1984). Students are given the floor plan of a shopping centre and asked to mark the name of the shop or the shopkeeper in appropriate spaces following the information given in the spoken passage.

The 'Job interviews' listening task is exercised based on comprehension question - answer on the tape-recorded interviews with two men ('interview 1' , 'interview 2') on the topic 'Why I changed jobs?' . The task consists of a sequence of activities including pre-task, question & answer, and feedback. All questions are presented in the written form in the textbook.

3. Examination in Terms of the Language Content

In this chapter, the 'language content' of the two above listening tasks will be examined from mainly two aspects chosen by the author, that is, difficulty & complexity of input and discourse features of the text. Firstly, we will begin with the examination of difficulty and complexity of text (input).

3.1 Difficulty and Complexity of Text (Input)

In order to provide appropriate input for learners teachers should examine the difficulty or complexity of the text. Brown and Yule (1983) have categorized spoken texts into three broad types: *static, dynamic,* and *abstract* and show a conceptual framework for grading listening input based on this categorization. Although this categorization is made on the basis of oral production, they assume that the genres which are relatively easy to listen to are those same genres which are relatively easy to produce. Anderson and Lynch (1988)

also suggest that we are likely to be able to use this categorization for grading listening complexity because of the similar results of the experiment on the listener's difficulty between and within types of input in this categorization. Therefore, we can use this framework for examining the difficulty or complexity of the text. To begin with, I will explain this framework briefly. There are two scales of difficulty built into a framework. First, difficulty increases from left to right, between types of input, that is, from static to abstract. Second, there is the top-to-bottom scale of relative complexity, within any one type of input. While Brown and Yule (1983) point out the number of characters in the text as a factor of complexity, Anderson and Lynch (1988) suggest that more various aspects of a language text that can affect its comprehension should be taken into account, such as, 'the way information is organized, its explicitness and redundancy, and the familiarity of the topic' (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p56). Therefore, we also would like to discuss these aspects of the text (input) in examining the difficulty of listening tasks. In addition to these features, the degree of authenticity will affect the difficulty or complexity of the text. I will examine one specific feature of authenticity in the next section.

First, we will examine the difficulty of the 'Shopping centre' text. According to Brown and Yule (1983), a static type of text involves such speech activity as describing an object or instructing someone to draw a diagram. In addition, Brown and Yule (1983) suggest that a text which addresses the listener directly and gives him/her instructions on how to do a specific task will be more comprehensible, since such discourse can maximally involve the listener without requiring special background knowledge. Then the 'Shopping centre' text which gives directions about the location of each store can be categorized into a static type of text and one easier to understand. This spoken passage by one speaker gives brief reasons for the allocation of each shop, such as 'Now the big site behind Dina's coffee-bar — will give to George for his furniture store — you'll need all that space for your tables and chairs, George'. Thus, we can say that this text involves explicit and redundant information for listeners. In terms of the topic, such a subject as 'shopping centre' will be familiar even to lower-level learners.

Second, I will examine the difficulty of the 'Job interviews' text. The text of the 'Job interviews' where two interviewees (the first, and the second) are stating why they changed jobs with their beliefs in jobs can be categorized into an abstract type of text, because the focus of this text is on someone's opinion-expressing which is suggested as an instance of an 'abstract text' by Brown and Yule (1983). Thus, this text is more difficult to understand

for learners than that of the 'Shopping centre' which is categorized into a static type of text. The complexity of the text is affected by the number of speakers and so the complexity of the 'Job interviews' text is higher than that of the 'Shopping centre' text, because the former text contains two different interviewer and interviewee pairs. Such a topic as 'job interviews' seems to be less familiar to certain learners, because this listening text requires learners certain amount of background knowledge on the journalist. Consequently, the text of the 'Job interviews' is likely to have higher complexity and difficulty than that of the 'Shopping centre'. We need to keep in mind, however, the difficulty of the text may vary according to the other factors such as the rate of delivery, and level of vocabulary. Thus, these factors should be examined as well in selecting listening tasks.

3.2 Discourse Features of the Text

While such discourse features as 'naturalness' or 'spontaneity' (e.g. self-corrections, hesitations) will make input more difficult to listen, they will practice the language content so as to make learners more able to cope with 'real life' speech when they meet it outside the learning situation. I would like to point out 'discourse features' among authenticity of the text as an important aspect of the language content, since to what degree input resembles natural discourse will be influenced by the amount of discourse features as well as other authentic features. The effect of exposure to discourse features is suggested by some researchers. Thomas (1982) suggests that an exercise to grasp a variety of discourse features signaled by speakers in the language is likely to develop one of predictive strategies. As well, Richards points out that some discourse features will help students to develop the concept of coherence in spoken English:

Proposition markers such as *of course* and *really* may indicate the attitude of the speaker to preceding or subsequent propositions, and discourse markers such as *well, anyway, actually, of course*, and *now* signal the continuity between one utterance and another. This means that the concept of coherence, as applied to conversational discourse, is very different from the way coherence is created in written discourse. Written discourse is planned, tightly organized, and generally the product of a single person. Spoken discourse is not preplanned, but is produced in ongoing time through mutual cooperation. Consequently, it presents meaning in a very different way from written discourse (Richards, 1983, p226).

In addition to these effects, discourse features will give students the opportunity to recognize the attitude or manner of the speakers of the listening text. Accordingly, types and numbers of discourse features shown in each text should be examined as an important aspect of the language content for checking the degree of authenticity of the text.

In the 'Shopping centre', most of the discourse features found in the text seem to serve as an 'initiator' (e.g. 'well','now'). In addition to these, addressing to a shopper (e.g. 'Carole','Sheila') may also serve the listeners as an 'indicator'of the new information. Next, I will illustrate some discourse features found in the 'Job interviews'. Such repetition as 'very, very nice feeling' will serve as an emphasis of a interviewee's attitudes. And such remarks as 'quite clearly' and 'quite honestly' will serve as an 'indicator' of interviewees' attitudes or belief. 'And so' will serve to show reason. In addition, the following discourse features found in this interview also will signal the intention of speakers; hesitation (e.g. 'yes, um','er'), repetition (e.g 'they're they're') and interjection of the interviewer (e.g. 'I see','Oh, dear'). These discourse features will help learners predict the interviewee's attitudes. In addition to discourse features discussed above, other authentic features such as 'incomplete sentences', 'natural start & stops', and 'relatively unstructured language' are involved in the text of the 'Job interviews'. Thus, it is clear that the 'Job interviews' text contains more various kinds of discourse features than that of the 'Shopping centre'. At the same time, it means that difficulty of input of the 'Job interviews' is higher than that of the 'Shopping centre'.

4. Examination in Terms of the Language Processing

As we have examined two listening tasks in terms of language content, it is also necessary to examine the task itself. In this paper I would like to focus on the 'language processing' likely to be promoted as an important aspect of the task. We can assume language processing promoted by the task by examining the type of the task, that is, how the task is designed or what kind of work is required to do for learners. We would like to begin with the examination of the 'Shopping centre'.

4.1. 'Shopping centre' - While Listening Task —

The 'Shopping centre' is a kind of 'information-transfer' task which is a typical type of while-listening task. Dunkel argues that it is effective to set a relevant task for learners to do while listening:

As a general rule, listening exercises are more effective if they are constructed around a task. Students should be required to do something in response to what they hear that will demonstrate understanding and will maintain attention (Dunkel, 1986, p103).

Among while-listening tasks, in particular, the 'information-transfer' type of task is often suggested to be effective for non-advanced learners (e.g. Dunkel, 1986; Underwood, 1989), because it is designed to provide aids for directing students' attention to focal points on the text so that they can develop specific listening skill to get 'detail comprehension' . In the 'Shopping centre' task the students are required to mark the name of the shop, the shopkeeper, or both on the picture of the floor plan, or to jot down only the initial letter of the shopkeeper. Thus, the students need to respond to each bit of information as it comes up in turn while listening. Accordingly, we can assume this task can improve selective strategy to catch specific information or items, since the students know in advance what kind of response they need to have and what kind of information should be caught and they do not need to focus their attention on every word or sentence. For example, let us see the next part in the 'Shopping centre' :

'Dina, I'm giving you the big site opposite the entrance for your coffee-bar — it's nice and central, so that shoppers will find it convenient to drop in for a cup of coffee or other refreshments.'

Here, relevant information to the student's response is included in the first part and the rest is redundant. Through this exercise the students are likely to develop the listening strategy to select the relevant information and filter out the rest, which can increase the speed of language processing.

As I suggested above, this kind of information-transfer listening task in the form of graphs, maps, or pictures can provide support to learners while listening 'by focusing' their attention on the important parts of the message and training them to listening for specific information (Sheerin, 1987). However, tasks should be simple particularly for non-advanced learners because it is difficult for the students to listen and write at the same time. Rost describes this issue as follows:

when graphic elements of the task require minimal visual interpretation and therefore

allow maximal attention to the spoken text, and when completions are limited to minimal writing, completion tasks may provide useful evidence of listener attention and understanding (Rost, 1990, pp.125-126).

The 'Shopping centre' listening task keeps the simplicity of the task by requiring learners to mark only a few letters.

4.2. 'Job interviews' — Pre-listening , While-listening & Post-listening tasks —

As the 'Job interviews' listening task consists of four different types of sub-tasks, each task shall be examined individually. We will begin by checking the 'Task 1' categorized into a pre-listening type of task .

4.2.1. Task 1 — Pre-listening Task —

The 'Task 1' is a kind of pre-listening task with group discussion on important reasons for job satisfaction. In general, pre-listening tasks can be given in a various form, such as reading something, looking at pictures, question & answer, discussion of the topic. As shown above, although a pre-listening task is not a listening exercise itself, it is helpful to provide contextual or linguistic information or to activate learners' background knowledge on the topic prior to listening to the text. In a real-life situation people generally have prediction or expectancy when they listen and they try to match it with the content of speech while listening. Therefore, if the students are required to listen to the text spoken in their second language about the particular subject without any information or background knowledge, they may be forced to listen with an extra burden on listening processing and to take more time for processing. In the pre-listening activity of the 'Job interviews' the students are going to have small-group discussion on the summary of research into reasons for job satisfaction. McKeating (1981) also recommends the introduction of the topic in the form of a short discussion because it not only arouses certain expectations and makes the students mentally prepared for the topic but also activates their previous knowledge of vocabulary associated with the topic. A summary presented with the 'Task 1' of the 'Job interviews' includes some reasons directly mentioned in the interviews; therefore, the students will be able to get more information through a group discussion, on the basis of reasons shown in a summary, on reasons why people change their jobs and will be able to predict the content of the interviews more specifically. Accordingly, we can assume that the

'Task 1' will promote development and use of learners' cognitive strategies to predict or anticipate the content of spoken message, which will contribute to reduce the extra burdens on students' language processing in the ensuing listening.

4.2.2. Task 2 － While-listening Task －

The 'Task 2' requires the students to answer three questions, such as 'What is the first speaker's job today?' , after listening to two interviews. This kind of question-answer is often used as a post-listening task to check learners' comprehension. The 'Task 2', however, is categorized into while-listening task, because it directs the students to look at the questions before listening and the question requires them to get a specific information (i. e. the present job, the former job). As shown in this case, how the question is delivered is an aspect of the listening task important to make it effective for developing language processing. If asked before, as with this task, the student can be guided to listen for particular information. As suggested by some researchers (e.g. Ur, 1984), however, if the questions are displayed to the students not in written form but spoken form, more effective listening practice will be expected.

4.2.3. Task 3 － Post-listening Task －

The 'Task 3' categorized into post-listening task requires the students to do task following four questions after listening to the 'interview 1' again:

Discuss the meaning of the word 'intangible' .
Do you agree that teaching is more 'intangible' than marketing?
Would you prefer teaching to marketing?
Why do you think he changed jobs?

We may assume that the purpose of the 'Task 3' is to expand on the topic or language of the text. For example, the first activity is to deduce the meaning of a word from the context. As is apparent, however, with the first, the second, and the third questions it is recognized that they are not likely to contribute to promote language processing because they do not give any help or practice in listening skills, although the additional language learning will enable students to listen more successfully on future occasions. As the same type of questions with the fourth question are shown in the 'Task 4' , this will be discussed in

the following section.

4.2.4. Task 4 — Post-listening Task —

The 'Task 4' categorized into a post-listening task requires students to perform two activities after listening to the 'interview 2' again. We will examine the two activities individually. Before entering on the examination of the activities, I would like to briefly refer to the post-listening task. The main purpose of the post-listening task is checking whether the students have understood what they needed to understand. The most popular form of post-listening task is the answering of multiple-choice questions including true/false questions or open questions based on the spoken text. Although this type of task has been the conventional type of listening activity in the past, it is often argued that this type of exercise is not to teach 'how to listen' but only to test learners' comprehension. For example, Richards argues that this type of comprehension questions focus on retrieval of information from learners' long-term memory rather than on the processing activities themselves (1983). Another purpose of the post-listening task, however, is suggested to give students the opportunity to consider the attitude and manner of the speakers of the authentic listening texts (Underswood, 1989), which is essential listening behaviors in the real world.

Considering the nature of the post-listening task, we will observe the first activity of the 'Task 4'. The first activity is the four comprehension questions:

Did he enjoy writing for magazines, broadcasting, etc?
Why did he stop?
Why did he dislike his first job?
How did he find his present job?

The second activity of the 'Task 4' consists of five true/false questions on the second interview like following questions:

He works in a nice place.
He likes the people he is working with.

The fourth questions ('Why do you think he changes jobs?') of the 'Task 3' are regarded as the same type of questions with these. While the first question is on a matter of fact by

answering just 'yes' or 'no' , other questions seem to be meaningful and more difficult because they are open-ended where responses can include learners' interpretation of what they heard rather than mere memory of facts.

As discussed above, however, multiple-questions including true/false questions are often reguarded as testing rather than teaching listening skills. Richards argues that this kind of activity in no way helps the learner develop the ability to grasp main ideas or extract relevant details (Richards, 1983, p234). As suggested in Tsuchimochi (1999) these two abilities (i. e. 'main idea comprehension' and 'detail comprehension') should be primarily developed at the intermediate level of learners. Consequently, the 'Task 3' and the 'Task 4' categorized into post-listening task are unlikely to contribute directly to the development of learners' language processing, particularly for non-advanced learners who have to primarily develop listening skills of partial comprehension (i.e. 'detail comprehension' ,

'main idea comprehension'). Although we have examined sub-activities of the 'Job interviews' individually, we may need to evaluate this as a sequence of listening task. Firstly, this task prepares students for a discussion on the topic in a pre-listening task before listening. Secondly, students are directed as to what aspects of the passage need focussing on, which will provide them a practice of skill-using. Lastly, students are guided to the post-listening phase which largely requires their interpretation of what the interviewees talked rather than mere memory of facts. Considering such a way of presentation of activities and high authenticity of the text, the 'Job interviews' may be regarded as a well organized sequence of listening tasks for learners particularly those who can deal with authentic listening texts, although the coursebook which involves this listening task is published for teaching elementary-level learners.

5. Discussion and Suggestions for Teaching Listening

We may say from the observation that while the 'Shopping centre' listening task seems more appropriate for lower level ability students as to the language content and language processing promoted by this task, the 'Job interviews' listening task can be appropriate for more advanced students because of its high difficulty of the text (abstract, lengthy, and more authentic text) and type-of task. As while-listening type of tasks like the 'Shopping centre' should be primarily provided lower-level students to give practice for skill-getting or skill-using for future 'global comprehension' , this type of task can be provided for the exercise of skill-using for advanced learners with more authentic and longer text and

with a pre-listening activity as used in the 'Job interviews'. As discussed in the Chapter 4, while-listening types of task are likely to develop listening skills such as scanning which can reduce the information processing load on listeners through tasks that are completed as the students listen. Anderson and Lynch (1988) state the relationship between nature of the task and language processing as follows:

> if the listeners are specifically told in advance which features of ensuing message are relevant to their listening purpose, the task is likely to be considerably easier. Given this sort of support, the listener can attend selectively to the appropriate parts of the message and therefore decrease the amount of information processing and memorization involved (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, pp.57-58).

In order to provide suitable while-listening tasks according to the level of the students, we may need to adjust the length of the text, the type or the number of response, the degree of authenticity, or the difficulty on the basis of some features as suggested in the chapter 3. Or we may need to provide adequate pre-listening tasks, as observed in the 'Job interview', depends on the nature of the text. These sorts of devices or support will also be able to reduce the load of language processing. Although while-listening tasks have been supported so far in this paper because they are likely to contribute to language processing, effective post-listening tasks also should be added so that learners can acquire real listening behaviors. For example, we may need to give the students post-listening tasks with the shorter text whose purpose is to consider the attitudes or manner of the speaker or to understand what the speaker intended to convey. Brown and Yule (1983) emphasize a 'reasonable interpretation' of what the speaker intended to communicate as a final goal for the students to arrive. Partial comprehension such as detail comprehension or main-idea comprehension of the factual content of the text, which can be developed through effective while- or post-listening tasks, will be the basis of this reasonable interpretation to be gained with considering both text and context.

Lastly, I would like to discuss again briefly two issues for teaching listening. The first one is the issue of 'authenticity' which affects the level of language content of the text. Although it has been a controversial issue whether hearing authentic discourse really provides the best training for real-life listening, I have suggested the use of semi-authentic texts in my previous study (Tsuchimochi, 1999) rather than of real non-scripted authentic

texts for teaching non-advanced students. It is particularly difficult for non-advanced students to disentangle the thread of discourse, to keep up with the speed, or to cope with frequent overlaps in segments of authentic speech solely through listening without visual clues such as video. As examined in this paper, nowadays published listening materials which can provide various types of approximation to real authentic speech are available. Exposure to such semi-authentic texts will gradually make students familiar with authentic features (e.g. naturalness, spontaneity) characteristic of real spoken discourse. Ur (1984) also suggests that final transition from 'imitation' authentic to 'genuine' authentic speech should take place smoothly by the use of carefully graded approximation to real speech.

The second issue is related to the contribution to the language processing. I would like to emphasize that a listening task should have an objective or objectives which will relate to either skill-using or skill-getting particularly for teaching non-advanced students who have limited ability on language processing. In addition to the listening tasks what referred in this paper, while-listening tasks which require listening processing demanded in authentic listening situations also should be added. For example, students will listen to radio weather forecast to find out regional weather details, or they will listen to a radio commercials to decide what kind of products are being promoted. The provision of realistic and pedagogically effective listening tasks will prepare students for efficient listening not only in the classroom but also in the real world. Whereas recent commercially prepared tape-based coursebooks for teaching listening multiply the range of materials, teachers need to have an opportunity for evaluating listening tasks according to the criteria as suggested in this paper or in Tsuchimochi (1999) to check if they are likely to develop specific listening skills appropriate for the level of the target students. After that, teachers may need to rearrange a sequence of listening tasks in the coursebook, or adapt them to suit the course objective. The familiarity of skill-getting and skill-using attained earlier will facilitate the successful processing of a spoken text much later for full comprehension, with an accompanying linguistic progress in the students.
In a well-graded syllabus of listening tasks we need to aim at a progression from directed listening for detail, to directed listening for global understanding, to undirected listening for detail, and, finally, undirected listening for global understanding.

6.Concluding Remarks

I have shown some factors which affect 'language content' and 'language processing'

with carrying out the examination of two listening tasks. As shown in this paper, listening tasks need to be appropriately designed both in terms of input and the task itself. Some input will be effectively used with the combination of some type of task. Teachers need to keep in mind that while listening tasks can be used to practice 'language content' and 'language processing' , input and type of task should be graded properly according to the level and objectives of the target learners so that learners can accumulate listening skills with the growth in proficiency for the future experience.

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