

# What Makes a Listening Task Effective? — Aiming at the Successful Training of Listening for Low-Intermediate Level Students —

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## Introduction

While my college students increasingly have strong interests in improving their practical English abilities, the biggest problem for them is a lack of listening ability. Even some competent students who can do well in the classroom are unable to transfer their skills of listening to real-life situations. In spite of long-period of studying English, the students' listening ability seems to be lower (low-intermediate level on average) than their other abilities because of limited exposure to spoken English outside classroom and of inappropriate or unsystematic instructions for listening up to college.

Although listening process is very hard to describe because of its implicit nature, a picture of listening process has emerged from psycholinguists and from the work of discourse analysts, such as Gillian Brown (1977). Compared with native speakers, foreign language learners have a limited capacity for information-processing, storage, and retrieval that cause difficulties (e. g. heavy memory load) in listening because of their inadequate knowledge of vocabulary, structure, or background knowledge.

Whereas the listener's role may be considered to be passive, foreign language learners need to be active in using listening skills or strategies to be a competent listener. Accordingly, we language teachers should provide learners with listening tasks whose purpose is to 'train' them to learn how to listen rather than to 'test' comprehension, in order to develop listening strategies that can compensate for inefficient listening ability.

While in recent years many commercially published tape-based coursebooks for teaching listening have become available for English teachers, many of them still consist of ineffective listening tasks. In teaching listening, we can manipulate two variables, that is, input (text) and tasks, both of which serve to develop ability in particular skill areas. Thus,

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we need to examine in using listening tasks what elements are involved in text and task to provide the targeted learners with effective listening training within the limited period of instructions. This paper will demonstrate some important elements involved in effective listening tasks for the development of listening ability of low-intermediate level college students. To discuss what elements need to be involved in effective listening task, we initially need to examine foreign language learners' problems in listening to spoken English in more detail. In Chapter I, this issue will be discussed. In Chapter II, three features of text will be suggested for effective listening tasks. In Chapter III, effective types of task for developing strategies for comprehension will be shown.

## **I . Foreign language learners' problems in listening to spoken English**

In order to look over difficulties in listening of low-intermediate level college students, we can resort to research on listening processing of foreign language learners. As to the problems of foreign language learners, 'process of information' is pointed out as an important aspect of listening. McLaughlin, Rossman and McLeod(1983) describe individual process of information in two aspects, that is, 'the focus of attention' and 'information-processing ability'. Therefore, L2 learners' problems in listening can be discussed under the investigation of these two aspects in the first language. Firstly, the issue of 'the focus of attention' can be treated by examining the memory system of the listener, especially 'short-term memory' (STM). Theoretically, memory can be divided into two types; short-term memory and long-term memory(LTM), as to different depth and duration of information storage. In language processing, short-term memory is considered to play a central role in the extract and temporal retention of meaning from spoken language. At the first stage, the sounds go into a sensory store often called a 'echoic memory' (e. g., Underwood, 1989). Then the second stage is the processing of information by the short-term memory which is also a very brief stage like a echoic memory. In both stages incoming speech has to be processed simultaneously and with extreme rapidity because of limited time for retention within the STM. Therefore, we can say that the speed of processing is very important in the STM including a echoic memory. Although only a few studies have investigated the relationship between STM and language learning(Call, 1985), what is suggested from these studies is that memory span is shorter in a foreign language than in the native language. Thus, it is assumed that the STM

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of a language learner is easily overloaded in processing spoken utterances because of its shorter memory span. Moreover, for foreign language learners, lack of phonological or linguistic knowledge will prevent or slow down perceptual processing in echoic memory, and lack of syntactic or existing knowledge of a foreign language stored in LTM will cause more constrain language processing in STM. Such problems of listening processing in STM may be reduced by developing specific listening skills or strategies by giving the training of how to approach input(text). Secondly, foreign language learners' problems in listening can be discussed by examining two theoretical models of listening processing, that is, 'bottom-up processing' and 'top-down processing'. Speaking briefly, while bottom-up processing which is in its nature 'data-driven, analytic, conscious approach' (Byrens, 1984, p327) is regarded as serial processing model, top-down processing is defined as a higher-level of process in which listeners utilize contextual information deriving from texts or their existing knowledge stored in long-term memory to understand what is said (Faerch and Kasper, 1986). More recent models of language comprehension propose simultaneous use of a wide variety of information sources by integrating both bottom-up and top-down processing, which is termed 'interactive processing'. In the case of foreign language learners, however, it is assumed that they cannot utilize such parallel approach subconsciously. As bottom-up processing is often pointed out as a heavily used skill by foreign language learners, most of my college students seem to tend to seek more linguistic accuracy than fluency by catching every word with equal attention. Such approach to the spoken text seems to have resulted from the grammar-translation method used for decoding written texts, which is a conventional teaching method used in Japanese secondary schools. As it is argued before, however, excessive use of such conscious approach will overload the limited capacity of short-term memory in listening to spoken English.

As we have shown, most of my college students who have not been given appropriate or systematic training for listening in the past need to be given listening activities which can develop not only the strategies for comprehension but the strategies for perception. Through the appropriate training, we need to teach the students that it is important to keep up with the speaker even if this means letting parts which they have failed to sort out pass and to make them realize that it is neither important nor expected for them to understand every word. As we have discussed above based on current research and theory, it is assumed that Japanese college students who have a limited capacity of listening to spoken English which is not their native language need to be given more explicit training of listening where students

can acquire strategies for perception and for comprehension which are transferable to real-life listening experience. Considering from the limited period of instructions, commercially published tape-based coursebooks which provide various types of input and tasks are accessible and helpful materials. When examining a 'listening task', it should be done from both aspects of text which learners listen and task which learners perform. However, many listening tasks in coursebooks do not seem to reflect a purpose for listening that approximates authentic real-life listening and simply develop the ability to perform classroom exercises. Therefore, I would like to demonstrate some elements which make listening task effective to develop listening skills or strategies that students can apply in the real life situations. This will be discussed separately from the aspects of text and task.

## **II. Elements involved in text**

Three specific features of text; 'authenticity', 'contextualized situation', and 'discourse type' which do not always seem to be reflected in the design of listening tasks in coursebooks are suggested as important elements of texts. Each feature will be discussed in turn with taking into account learners' difficulties in listening to spoken English.

### **1. Authenticity of text**

We can define that if any text is produced in response to real life communicative needs rather than as imitation of real world communicative needs, it is authentic (Forman cited in Underwood, 1989). Accordingly, any text produced for language teaching is not authentic. Since development of communicative competence to the fore, recent consensus seems to be in favor of the use of authentic texts. The features which characterize authentic speech are naturalness and spontaneity. While natural qualities are characterized by features such as natural speed, stress, rhythm, and pronunciation, spontaneity is such as self-corrections, natural starts and stops, hesitation, and incomplete sentences. Although it must be important to make students familiar with such features of authentic speech, authentic texts do not seem to be appropriate for teaching low-intermediate level students. This is because, as often argued, authentic texts are too difficult to understand for non-advanced learners. In fact, a fair amount of materials in the coursebooks falls into the non-authentic category. The typical listening text has a uniform and slow pace, and lacks of discourse features. However,

recently we can find semi-authentic texts which incorporate the features of authentic speech suggested above, even if most of them may be still difficult to understand. Such texts should be more utilized for teaching non-advanced students to develop strategies for perception which can reduce the load of short-term memory at the initial stage. Semi-authentic texts will enable students to be familiarized with the relative rapidity and variability of natural discourse. Richards (1983) also argues that materials for teaching listening should aim at relative authenticity if they want to prepare learners for real listening.

As was suggested, the problem with authentic or semi-authentic texts is that they are generally perceived as being too difficult for non-advanced students. Some researchers (e.g., Lund, 1990) argued that difficulty should be considered as an attribute of tasks rather than texts themselves. That is, for language teachers what should be taken into account in using authentic or semi-authentic texts is that what type of task is associated with the text. In other words, the issue is not if we can use such texts or not but how we should use them. It is supposed that semi-authentic texts can be used effectively even for low-intermediate level students if they are combined with simple tasks which do not depend on full comprehension. We shall return to this issue later in Chapter III.

## 2. Contextualized situation

Secondly, I would like to point out 'contextualized situation' as an important feature of text, since the importance of context still seems to have been neglected in listening tasks in many coursebooks. The importance of context, emerged in 1970's, has still been strongly supported with the realization that communicative competence should be developed in contextualized situations (Faerch and Kasper, 1986). Recent work on the process of listening also suggests that 'comprehension can only occur when the listener can place what he/she hears in a context, even if this context has to be provided by the listener him/herself' (Underwood, 1989, p3). As often suggested, native speakers can easily place language in a 'context of situation' or can be more sensitive to contextual cues, particularly in familiar situations, due to their background knowledge, particularly knowledge relevant to the topic of the text, or previous listening experience. Thus, it is supposed that native speakers can expect certain kind of language to occur or can predict what will follow in a particular context without much processing of the actual input. Accordingly, we can say that native speakers have the advantage of using top-down processing by use of knowledge derived from the

context or their own existing knowledge to constrain interpretation at the earliest possible moment during processing (Garrod, 1986). On the other hand, foreign language learners cannot easily use contextual information or cues due to lack of linguistic or background knowledge. What we need to provide students who have such disadvantage is that to put them into a contextualized situation which they will experience in real life so that they can identify or guess what word is being used or to predict what will follow in a particular situation. Such help should be provided especially for low-intermediate level students if we want to make them effective listener not only in the classroom but also outside classroom.

However, there are many coursebooks whose texts are isolated from natural discourse and consequently impose a context-free interpretation, since the idea of context-free comprehension has been long tradition in the design of texts. In such texts comprehension is viewed primarily in terms of speech perception and syntactic processing and little attention seems to be paid to understanding in the natural contexts of usage.

In addition to the use of texts uttered in contextualized situations, what other factors should be considered to give students as many useful cues to the context as is feasible? Brown (1990) suggests that the listener encounters the context with his accumulated stereotypical knowledge which relates to at least five features; the speaker, the listener, the physical context such as time and place, genre, and topic. We may say that among these five features 'topic' is an important factor we should take into account in selecting listening tasks. Garrod (1986) also emphasizes that 'what is being talked about' is one of important aspects of context which can affect the interpretation of an utterance. As to low-intermediate level students, they initially should be given texts which help learners to develop ability to identify or guess what word or phrase is being used in a particular situation. According to Brown and Yule (1983), the topic will largely determine the content of vocabulary. Therefore, texts talked on familiar topics (e.g. daily life) are likely to give learners more chances to use their background knowledge or contextual cues to identify or guess words or phrases in a certain situation.

In terms of the effect of context, one problem will arise if we want to use shorter texts for non-advanced students because they are easier to understand. As Brown (1977) also points out, we may face the fact that shorter utterances are easier to process, although longer texts can provide the listener with more chances to establish a context while listening. How can we solve this problem? As one example, we can suggest the use of coursebooks consisting of topic-based units which cover a wide variety of everyday situation. Within

each unit, every short text in listening tasks is produced around one situation of the topic. In this way, each unit can keep continuity and development of context. Within a sequence of listening tasks relevant to one topic, learners will be able to become more familiar with the language in a certain situation and apply newly acquired knowledge or activate their existing knowledge in the subsequent text processing. In fact, using sequences of short texts produced around one topic will avoid the risk of overload in processing input and provide learners with a step toward processing of longer texts.

### **3. Discourse type**

Thirdly, I would like to focus attention on discourse type of text. Brown and Yule(1983) make a broad distinction between the purpose of communication ‘interactional language’ and ‘transactional language’, which often referred in discussing discourse type of listening tasks by researchers(e.g., Byrnes, 1984; Anderson and Lynch, 1988; Rost, 1990). According to Brown and Yule(1983), ‘interactional discourse’ is used where the primary purpose of communication is social conversation, while ‘transactional discourse’ is used primary for the transfer or change of information. In many settings where the listener cannot or does not interact with a speaker, transactional discourse is used for the transfer of information(e.g., radio weather forecast, announcement in an airport). Although a variety of texts may need to be taught, transactional discourse seems to be more appropriate for training in listening, particularly for non-advanced students. This is because the primary issue of transactional talk is the exchange of information, whereas the main focus of interactional talk among native speakers is mere friendly talk which normally contains less information. Anderson and Lynch(1988) also emphasize the importance of primarily teaching transactional talk, since for many students listening to transactional discourse seems to be the most demanding and therefore it is a skill that needs a considerable amount of practice and training. In fact, compared with interactional discourse, transactional discourse is more suitable for developing specific listening skills(e.g. selecting) to get particular information. This is because transactional discourse will be able to put learners into a situation where they are more likely to focus on particular aspects of input to carry out a particular task. Such support by the use of transactional discourse type of texts should be more taken into account in teaching low-intermediate level students. As it was discussed first in this section, however, teachers may need to expose students to interactional talk as well as transactional discourse to make students familiar various type of spoken English. Here, we would like to suggest that

teachers select listening tasks where utterances are carried out to exchange or transfer specific information and tasks are designed to require students to get specific items or information. Anderson and Lynch (ibid.) also suggest that the use of interactional talk in the classroom need to create the impression that 'such events arise in response to a speaker's need to give the listener information, rather than arising as part of their social relationship' (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p72).

As three specific features of text have been discussed, how we can utilize texts effectively according to the level of students is deeply related to the type of tasks themselves. Next, effective type of listening tasks shall be discussed with the contrast of inappropriate type of task.

### III. Effective types of task

Before entering into discussion of effective types of task, it will be useful to mention 'listener function' defined by Lund (1990) to know what abilities for text comprehension should be primarily developed at low-intermediate level students. Lund defined listener function as 'the aspects of message the listener attempts to process' (Lund, 1990, p107). We can say that listener function is probably the most important aspect of teaching how to approach the text. He defines six listener functions as 'identification', 'orientation', 'main idea comprehension', 'detail comprehension', and 'full comprehension'. Among these five functions 'main idea comprehension' and 'detail comprehension' should be primarily developed at the intermediate level of learners. Although listening development may not be linear, it is suggested by some researchers (e. g., Byrnes, 1984) that growth of detail works should precede global work. This latter view of listening development is very efficient within a limited period of instruction, because students need to learn how to orient themselves for full comprehension of more complicated and longer texts by building up their previous listening training of how to approach texts. It is also important to develop strategies for 'main idea comprehension' and 'detail comprehension' in order to make learners realize that such partial comprehension is sufficient for their needs in the real world. Based on this idea of listening development and listener function, effective type of listening task will be discussed.

In essence, listening activities are categorized into three stages; pre-listening activity,

while-listening activity, and post-listening activity even though some activities may stand across two stages. Pre-listening activities are often suggested as important preparatory activities so that learners can activate or can be supplied social, cultural or linguistic knowledge relevant to texts. However, this type of task is not discussed in this paper, because most pre-listening activities themselves are not actual listening activities.

Let us begin with post-listening task which is traditionally and widely used in coursebooks. Post-listening tasks are those which require learners to formulate the response after listening. Whereas most common forms of post-listening tasks are multiple-choice or true / false questions asked after listening to fairly long passages, they are not effective to teach how to listen effectively. This is because such type of post-listening task is considered only to test learners' comprehension or memory of a whole text, and thus this type of task in no way helps the learner develop skills to grasp main ideas or extract relevant details or information. There are effective types of post-listening task, however, in which questions precede listening to several short utterances. This type of listening task helps learners to grasp main ideas or gist of the text. To take an example, a listening task requires learners to find which product is announced after listening to a radio advertisement. As 'six listener functions' have mentioned above, Lund(1990) suggests that 'main idea comprehension' is the first to involve actual comprehension of the message and this listening ability typically distinguishes the intermediate listener from the novice. In fact, reconstruction of meaningful chunks to get the main idea is the commonly used basic listening processing in everyday situations, although foreign language learners may not be able to easily use this strategy without appropriate training of listening. Accordingly, low-intermediate level students should be more given such exercises where they are provided any purpose for listening in advance to understand what is the main idea in utterances.

Secondly, I would like to discuss what type of while-listening tasks is effective for the training of low-intermediate level students. While-listening tasks require learners to do some specific work while they are listening. This type of activity is often suggested to be effective particularly for non-advanced learners(e.g., Dunkel, 1986; Underwood, 1989), since it is designed to provide aids for directing students' attention to focal points on the tape so that they can develop specific listening skill to get 'detail comprehension'. I need to point out, however, that some type of while-listening tasks does not seem to be related to the development of listening comprehension. It is a dictation type listening task that has been long and widely used in coursebooks. Whereas dictation type activities has been

suggested as developing effective strategies to enable students to increase their short-term memory retention through exercises of segmenting (e.g., Rivers and Temperley, 1978), they are not considered to provide any help or to foster any specific skills for comprehension. For example, Lund argues that in dictation the listeners' attention is focused more 'on the fidelity of the replication than on the depth of comprehension, more on surface processing than meaningful processing (Lund, 1990, p109). Sugawara (1999) conducted the experiment to examine whether dictation will promote listening comprehension. The results show that listeners do not seem to understand texts while they are writing down words. Sugawara (1999) interprets this results that learners would have only concentrated on filling in the blanks by depending on incoming acoustic information without building up the meaning of the text to reduce mental efforts, and concludes that dictation do not seem to be a proper technique to promote learners' listening comprehension. From these suggestions we may assume that dictation long and widely used in coursebooks does not appear to promote strategies for comprehension, although it may be used to develop strategies for perception.

Finally we would like to show effective type of while-listening task for developing detailed comprehension by examining specific features. It is a 'information transfer' type of activities in which learners are required to get specific items or information and to transfer them to assigned forms while listening. What seems to be the most helpful feature of this type of task is that responses are often demonstrated in the graphic form such as pictures, charts, maps, or grids. Learners are more likely to hear particular information, because they are orientated towards it by means of visual support. The increasing use of such visual support in the graphic form in listening tasks is supposed to be 'largely the result of a growing concern with helping learners to focus their attention on the relevant information in the recorded texts' (Anderson and Lynch, 1988, p90). Considering from the effect of visual, graphic forms used in listening tasks should not be complicated so as not to distract learners' attention. Rost also points out 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.127-128). As he suggested, completion tasks also should be simple as well as pictorial forms. With the accumulation of this type of training, learners can gradually develop such skill-use and skill-getting such as recognizing, predicting, or scanning to get specific items or information. In addition to the visual support, some type of task can help learners to experience authentic

use of language. Transactional and semi-authentic texts can be most used with being combined with information-transfer type of task. For example, learners may need to recognize brand names of goods, note down information (phone numbers, or prices), or check timetables. Compared with conventional exercises such as multiple-choice, true / false questions, and many forms of questioning, this type of while-listening task is likely to be effective because it allows learners various listening experiences encountered in the real world. Such authentic listening activities should be more introduced in the classroom as well as semi-authentic texts for developing listening skills which can be applicable to the real world.

As we have shown some appropriate types of task which enable learners to develop listening strategies for comprehension, they should be combined with texts which incorporate such important features as suggested in Chapter II in order to increase the effectiveness of listening tasks.

### **Concluding remarks**

This study attempted to demonstrate what features should be involved in effective listening tasks by examining individually the nature or type of text and task. As to teaching low-intermediate level college students, they may need to be primarily provided listening tasks which can help students to develop strategies for partial comprehension (e. g. main-idea or detailed comprehension) applicable to the real-life situations. While there might be other types of task, we language teachers need to consider the following points: (1) if the listening task can develop abilities of listening which transfer to real life listening purposes, and (2) if the listening task can provide learners with any help to develop the abilities. These two points are the cruxes of the issue in this study and they should be reflected in the future coursebooks of listening comprehension particularly for lower level learners learning English as a foreign language.

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