

# The Teaching of Listening at a Conversation School in Japan

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*Listening is the Cinderella skill in second language learning. All too often it has been overlooked by its elder sister: speaking.* (Nunan 1997 : 47)

As one of the so-called *receptive* skills, like reading, listening has often been viewed as a means to an end rather than an end in itself. However, research into second language acquisition, which emphasises the role of comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982), has done much to raise the awareness of how important listening is for EFL. Because learning cannot begin without understanding input, of which listening is shown to be the most dominant medium (up to five times that of reading (Rivers, 1981)), listening is regarded as a fundamental aspect of developing speaking skills (Nunan, 1997).

This paper will consider this important skills area of English Language teaching and learning. The focus will be on general ELT classes in Japan with particular reference to my experiences while teaching at a British Council school (where I had worked for 4 years) in Kyoto.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the appropriacy of the materials, practices and objectives, with regard to the needs and weaknesses that are particular to Japanese students, and in view of current teaching methodology and practice. It should be noted that unless otherwise stated, reference to course materials can be assumed to be *Headway* series by Liz & John Soares. The series is popular and widely used with general ELT courses, including those provided at many British Council schools throughout the world.

While reading this paper, it may be useful to consider the following observation:

*'In teaching listening skills our aim is to provide comprehensible, focused input and purposeful listening tasks which develop competence in particular listening abilities.'*

(Rivers 1981 : 171)

The British Council teaching body follows a communicative or '*Learning by Doing*' approach to teaching which considers language as '*a tool for communication rather than as a subject to be studied*' (The British Council, 1998). This contrasts sharply with the Japanese public

educational system in which the passing of exams is the primary goal of study. The result of this '*paper test phenomenon*' (Offner, 1997) is that students often have a well-developed knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, but very weak oral communication skills.

To account for this, one aim of the British Council is to emphasise and encourage the idea of learning *to use*, and not just learning *about* a language. Class activities therefore aim to be learner-centred, with a focus on listening and speaking skills, rather than literacy skills. Consequently, students are supported in activating their, often large, but previously passive store of language, and ultimately improving their communicative competence.

While this approach clearly offers a sound pedagogical base for the teaching of listening, for a number of reasons it may not be appropriate for students whose only experience of English learning has been from a Japanese school, college, or university.

On a general level, tasks and materials may not be as relevant or indeed interesting to Japanese students as (western) teachers might expect. Often one hears a teacher's disbelief at how an apparently engaging task fell flat, or alternatively, about how a '*boring*' topic was unexpectedly popular with students. Unfortunately, although experience allows teachers to quickly know what 'works', in the class, the materials of a conversation school may not cater for Japanese tastes. This is despite there being available, particularly in Japan and America, a wide range of such materials which have been specifically written for Japanese learners. As Littlewood (1981) points out, for listening comprehension, it is important that material is interesting and relevant because it will help provide the students with both motivation and communicative purpose. Furthermore, because students will have less relevant background knowledge (termed as *scripts* and *schemata*, by Schank & Abelson, 1977) at their disposal, pre-listening and predictive type tasks will be less effective in supporting the students' listening. The importance of considering students' backgrounds is suggested by Ellis (1996) who considered the cultural effects on learning. This work concludes that if teachers neglect to account the students cultural backgrounds and experience, and new information is introduced too quickly or is too disparate, there may be negative effects for the learning process.

A second problem facing many Japanese students, and which needs to be accounted for, is that learning English in a Japanese school still offers limited opportunities for effective listening practice. Much of the listening that exists is often test based with little or no 'teaching' or developing of essential listening skills.

Recent listening methodology emphasises the importance of practising these so called 'micro-skills' for successful listening development. It models the native listener's cognitive process of comprehension (for a good summary see Clark & Clark (1977)) which in turn allows us to identify the necessary skills students need in order to imitate native listening comprehension.

Without practice in these skills, students are less able to handle authentic type listening. A comprehensive list of these is given by Richards (1987 : 167) and includes being able to recognise stress patterns, distinctive sounds, word boundaries, or the functions of stress and intonation. Because Japanese learners have not often been given the chance to develop these skills, they have particular problems perceiving certain elements that make up streams of spoken input.

Further difficulties in perceiving sounds arise from having to overcome the inherent differences that exist between the Japanese language and English. In addition to the disparities in phonetics, grammar, and lexis, particular difficulties for listening are often caused because students are unfamiliar with the stress-timed aspect of English, which is not found in Japanese. Again, it is useful to highlight the importance of considering students' background, this time, from a viewpoint of their L1. As Field comments :

*'Greek tends to be spoken louder than English, French with tenser articulation, Japanese and Chinese at higher level speaking ranges. Consequently, native speakers of those languages have different expectations of the voices they hear from those of a native English speaker.'* (Field 1995 : 48)

In this respect, it could be argued that Japanese students need *intensive* rather than *extensive* listening practice in order to overcome the skills gap in perceiving input. This in turn will allow them to cope better with '*bottom-up*' processing ; the cognitive processing of comprehension which assumes meaning to be derived from the sounds entering the ear. In contrast, '*top-down*' processing regards prior knowledge as the key to interpreting aural input.

Because practising intensive listening resembles the kind of listening tasks students may have gained from school (except that the focus should be on supporting, rather than testing, the students listening) the familiarity of such listening tasks may help to build the students confidence with listening *par se*. However, when following the communicative methodology of teaching, there is a bias towards extensive listening and practise of *top-down* processing. Although it is generally accepted (see Burgess (1997),and Nunan (1997)) that both kinds of processing skills are necessary for comprehension, a more suitable balance may need to be considered with regard to Japanese students' needs and weaknesses.

Looking more specifically at the materials typically used at the British Council, though they increasingly include tasks that focus on, and help develop learning skills and techniques, those for listening are rarely referred to. Unfortunately, this means that minimal attention is given to important listening skills such as inferring, clarification, anticipating, and particularly relevant to Japanese, socio-linguistic interpretation. Subsequently, their being included in the syllabus is dependent on the teacher's own awareness of these skills and the time available,

given that other elements of a combe also need to be covered.

On the more positive side, materials do generally reflect the shift of the past two to three decades from *testing* to *teaching* listening. This can often be seen in the materials forward or teachers notes such as the EFL video series *Voices*. As an example, in this book, we are reminded that comprehension tasks '*are not a 'test' (and) are designed to help*' (Jones 1997 : 8).

Teachers should therefore base much of the supplementary material they prepare on this approach. Older material can be adapted to be less demanding, and less reliant on memory, by supporting them with visuals, and pre-listening, heuristic, and gist type activities. Such an approach is recommended by writers such as Ur (1984), and Anderson & Lynch (1988) who illustrate the influence activities can have on grading tasks, and in ways that assist, not test listening.

Interestingly however, Field (1998) considers the *comprehension approach* to be less effective than the *diagnostic approach* for teaching listening. He refers to this debate as '*Product v Process*,' in which the comprehension approach focuses on the former, and the diagnostic approach, the latter. In this discussion he quotes Brown (1986 : 286) who argues that without any means to diagnose the listening process, only testing of listening is possible. To adopt the diagnostic approach however, one needs to address the realities of training teachers to become familiar with new 'diagnostic' techniques and skills. This would involve identifying practices associated with unsuccessful listening, and then modifying learners' behaviour by practising appropriate listening skills.

Central to the choice of material is also the debate on whether to use authentic or non-authentic texts.

*Authentic texts are those which are designed for native speakers : they are texts designed not for language students, but for the speakers of the language in question.*  
(Harmer 1991 : 146)

There is sometimes a reluctance to use authentic material because it is perceived to be too difficult for many students. However, as we have already seen, the tasks set can be very influential on the ease or difficulty in which a student is likely to find a task.

Although there has been much debate about the ideal level of authenticity, there is a lot of support for variety. Ur, for example, talks of a suitable transition from '*imitation*' authentic to '*genuine*' authentic (1984 : 23) when grading listening materials. A variety in materials is therefore important in order to help ensure that a suitable range in the authenticity of tasks

is provided. Among the supplementary materials that can give genuinely authentic listening opportunities, are video recordings from English television programmes, seminars conducted by teachers or guests, and of course, input from the students themselves with, for example, class presentations. On the other hand, material that would be considered 'authentic in nature' (having been produced specifically for ELT), may include classroom language, teacher recorded dialogues, and live teacher presentations (both monologue and dialogue). Provided they are not scripted or rehearsed, these contain many of the features found in the spontaneous language of speech (rather than written language). As some examples, authentic texts tend to have natural (not consistent) speech rate, overlaps in conversation, short forms or contractions, repetition and redundant language. An additional feature of live presentations is that they promote listening as an active skill. The listener, through gesture, facial expression, or oral feedback to the speaker, can actively participate in the language exchange.

As native listeners, we have to listen in many different situations, and with different purposes. Consequently, if students are exposed to a similar variety of listening situations, this itself could be considered an authentic part of the listening process. In a typical communicative lesson, learners should be able to listen as eavesdropper or participator, with dialogue or monologue, and to many accents; both recorded and from the teachers. In addition, through the visual support of video, students should also be able to cope with more realistic exchanges, for example, distinguishing more easily between people in a multiple conversation.

Exposing students to these authentic (or near authentic) materials and tasks is important in helping them realise their listening aims. Because the majority of students study in order to communicate with foreigners, they need to be given the means to cope with authentic conversation. As Rivers aptly points out:

*Teaching students to comprehend artificial language combinations which would rarely be heard from a native speaker is a waste of time and energy, and can only confuse students when later confronted with natural speech.'* (Rivers 1981 : 168)

To add to the variety and availability of listening materials, additional listening exposure can be encouraged through use of self-access centres (SAC) and out of class social events. However, because there is the tendency for Japanese students to rely on the teacher for direction, the successful use of these centres will depend on students becoming accustomed to learner-centred materials which again is a key aspect of communicative teaching.

In conclusion, we have seen that in order to develop the learner's communicative competence, of which listening is an essential element, is generally accepted that the methods associated with communicative teaching should be followed. However, we have also seen that the appropriateness of this approach may need to be considered more closely in relation to the

educational and cultural background of many Japanese language students. Damen wrote that :

*'Learning involves the incorporating of new information into old sets of beliefs and knowledge for the purpose of maintaining a consistent world view.'* (Damen 1987 : 302)

This should be a warning that we do not underestimate the effects that differences in background, or indeed teaching methods, have on a student entering a western style learning environment for the first time.

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