

《論 文》

Listening Opportunities in a Japanese EFL Class

Brendon Muir

Abstract

In this paper I evaluate the listening opportunities for a specific group of EFL learners in an upcoming EFL course and suggest a prioritized range of learning opportunities for them. Learning considerations, needs and priorities particular to the group are discussed, and the listening opportunities are presented in relation to Newton's (2009) five listening opportunity standards. I conclude that top-down listening activities are the best opportunities in this class and suggest improvised use by classes with similar student demographics.

Key words : listening, top-down, strategy, opportunity standards

Learning Considerations, Needs and Priorities

The specific group of learners is a class of fifteen Japanese EFL students. They are enrolled in a community college 'Travel English' course comprised of a total of twenty four, two-hour lessons over two semesters. The course has a commercially available 'Travel English' textbook assigned to it with accompanying listening CD, although materials are not restricted to the assigned textbook. Relevant information related to the learning needs and priorities of these students include age, occupation, specialized class topic, intended travel destinations and English level.

The students range in age from middle-aged to elderly. Whilst no students identify as hearing impaired, some slight age related hearing difficulties are expected. Preferred volume of speech in listening activities, especially if recorded material is used, may differ widely. In addition, while most students have smart phones etc., compared to young learners there may be some detailed technology guidance required for any recommended online listening practice outside (or inside) the classroom.

The class is held in the early afternoon on weekdays, so the occupations of the students are either home-makers or retirees. I expect the students to have more free time than average to take advantage of 'beyond the classroom' listening activities.

As this is not a general EFL class, but a specific 'Travel English' class, there are a range of communication situations that students wish to prepare for, such as in-flight situations, security and immigration formalities, and accommodation check-in.

Also, of particular note, the students have a wide range of intended travel destinations, meaning that a majority of their English language interaction is likely to be with non-native speakers.

Finally, the English level of the students is on average lower-intermediate, ranging from beginner to intermediate.

Listening Opportunities

The first area for prioritizing suggested is top-down, or strategy based listening activities. Yeldham (2016) compares an interactive approach to listening instruction, that is combining strategies (or top-down skills) and bottom-up skills, and a 'strategies only' approach. He suggests that, "for lower-intermediate-level listeners, it is better to focus more on developing their listening strategies than to provide them with a balanced interactive approach." (p. 394). Bottom-up listening activities do have support though. Yeldman does acknowledge certain better performance on bottom-up style processing by students receiving the interactive approach, but overall listening comprehension was better among students in his study that received only the strategies approach. Also, Siegel (2016) found that bottom-up activities are effective and viable for the L2 classroom.

With the current group of students' main reason for enrolling in the course being communication skills for travelling, and their travel interests extending to all corners of the globe, interaction with many L2 English speakers is expected. For this reason, overall listening comprehension is a better goal to make the most of their limited time.

In addition, the value of bottom-up processing listening instruction, e.g. lexical segmentation problem and practice exercises to address such problems suggested by Field (2003), will be limited. The varying accents and L1 influences on lexical segmentation, and other speech phenomena that will affect comprehension is broad. While acknowledging that completely abandoning bottom-up skills practice is not ideal, with a limited amount of classroom time, devotion to strategies based learning opportunities is prioritized.

With the intended scope of listening activities narrowed to top-down style, I will outline my suggested activities with reference to the Opportunity Standards for listening proposed by Newton (2009).

Opportunity Standard 1. Extensive meaning-focused listening. The first suggested listening activity is using the CD that accompanies the course textbook for meaning-focused listening. The CD has roleplayed conversations in situations faced by travellers such as speaking with flight attendants, security and immigration, and check-in at accommodation. There are also comprehension checking activities such as multiple choice questions.

Unfortunately, the CD is mostly limited to interactions with native speakers (when actually other L2 speakers would be preferred), so is relegated to out-of-class 'self-study' practice, and use as a lesson preview tool. An opportunity for questions and/or answer checking is provided in class. This relegation allows students to personalize playback volume etc. to compensate for any listening troubles, but also carries some costs to the students' listening learning opportunity. Another self-study option will be recommended that specifically provides listening opportunities with non-native English speakers - passive listening via ted talks. By searching preferred countries at ted.com/speakers students can be exposed to English accents from nationalities of their choice. These online talks also have the option of subtitled playback for self-assessing listening accuracy.

The CD when used as a self-study tool met Newton's 'MINUS' learning conditions of 'meaningful' and 'interesting' (based on the travel oriented content), and also 'new learning' with L2 translation glossary, written script, and limitless re-listening opportunities. The 'understanding' condition is only met partially, with comprehension checks and learning-burden control largely left to the students. Finally, the stress-free condition is lacking without the monitoring and encouragement in real time from the teacher.

Opportunity Standard 2. Guided diagnosis of miscomprehension problems. Wilson's (2003) 'Discovery listening' exercise is chosen, with a twist. The textbook includes situational conversations (similar in form, but different to those on the CD) that will fit well to a dictogloss type activity. While Wilson presented this exercise as a way to incorporate bottom-up activities into a task based approach, I think an adjustment to the exercise will sufficiently transform it to a top-down approach that will better serve the students in the myriad of bottom-up processing problems they will face abroad. Instead of using a text, as used by Wilson, the situational conversation will be used instead, read by the teacher,

and a student selected for their basic reading ability. In essence, the first of Wilson's three phases, the listening task, will be the same. Also, the all-important reconstructing phase will also be the same. Here our students not only re-write a text, but also the order of speaking between the two people and other conversation related interactions. In the third and final 'discovering' phase, while comparing the students' constructed dialog with the original dialog, we'll take focus away from specific bottom-up problems, and focus on outcomes of the reconstructed conversations i.e. did their reconstructed dialogs have the participants arrive at the same result? Where differences in result arise, I will use this activity as a segue into Opportunity Standard 4 (see below).

As students become familiar with the exercise and the three phases I will also introduce more and more difficult travel related conversations at more and more challenging speeds. Students will be given opportunities to imitate the difficult speech. This activity is inspired by Cauldwell (2002) who challenges giving listening tasks that are manageable for students and suggests native-like speed that is too difficult can have a positive result – leaving students 'happy', IF they are given a chance to imitate native-like English at the same time and speed as the speaker. This listening exercise will help prepare students for comprehension gaps when listening to native-like speed without native-like pronunciation etc. from L2 speakers abroad.

Opportunity Standard 3. Skills training and practice. Given the students' expected frequency of communication with non-native speakers, devoting precious classroom listening activity time to the speech phenomena in native English did not seem warranted in this particular case. No listening activities are planned that accommodate this opportunity standard.

Opportunity Standard 4. Strategy training. Learning opportunities addressing standard four are essential for this group of students. I suggest in the discovery listening exercise noted above, in the 'discovering phase' encouraging tolerating partial understanding and inferring meaning as comprehension strategies. Also, introduce learning strategies such as phrases for interrupting, asking for clarification, and using polar questions to confirm understanding.

Opportunity Standard 5. Links to listening beyond the classroom. Newton (2009) has an inspiring description of the importance of listening beyond the classroom. "...only when learners are tapping into these opportunities are we likely to see listening skills flourish" (p. 57).

As noted, this group of EFL learners are expected to have free time for listening beyond the classroom. The first listening activity planned for at home is the CD associated with the textbook which I discussed in Opportunity Standard 1.

There is a plethora of options for listening beyond the classroom. In the classroom students may stick with a listening activity due to teacher encouragement, or group dynamics, even when it is no longer captivating for the student. However, outside the classroom the importance for personal interest is even more pronounced, when the choice of stopping is always available. For this reason, and also that the L1 is Japanese which will allow access to many useful local online websites in Japanese, I will set a homework assignment to find one interesting online (or other) listening opportunity that they personally enjoy. Then create a sharing time so students can share their personally selected resources. This student led approach will let students stay within their technology comfort zone.

Conclusion and Implications

In conclusion, the main focus of listening learning opportunities for this group of Japanese EFL students was targeting overall comprehension using top-down listening activities. With regards to Newton's (2009) Opportunity standards for listening it meant excluding classroom time for 1 - Extensive meaning-focused listening (instead assigning this for home study) and 3 - Listening strategy training. It also required a 'top-down' adjustment to the exercise selected for 2 - Guided diagnosis of miscomprehension problems. While Newton's standards are best used when they build on each other, the learning considerations, needs and priorities guided this selection. Contributing to this judgement were the students' older age group, the 'Travel English' curriculum, expectation of many L2-L2 speaking experiences, limited classroom time, and more than usual outside-the-classroom time for study. The listening opportunities identified for this group of EFL learners could be a framework that is used for EFL classrooms with similar student demographics. Other community college EFL lessons could improvise these listening opportunities for use in their curriculum as a starting point for further development and collaborative improvement.

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(Brendon Muir. Sapporo Gakuin University Part-Time Lecturer)