An Observation on Features of Listening Activities in Two Types of Classrooms

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Abstract

This paper deals with listening activities in a university in southern Japan. There are two types of classes involved: an elective English phonetics course at CALL (computer-assisted language learning) and compulsory courses targeting four skills on English communication in normal classrooms. Participants are all female students from second-year to fourth-year in the former and first-year in the latter. Each course includes listening sections with multiple-choice questions and partial dictation. After learning fundamental information in class, students were offered listening assignments. Prospects will be introduced with practical class situations, related to various linguistic approaches including pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, and reading context. The general impression will also be discussed in order to grasp tendencies of students' issues to discover better strategies and consequently make use of them for future education.

Keywords: CALL (computer-assisted language learning), consonants, dictation, multiple-choice questions, phonemes, phonetic symbols, supra-segmental phonemes, transcription, vowels

Introduction

What are language learners' motivations? In particular, English is a so-called global language. The COVID-19 pandemic suddenly occurred and made drastic changes to our surroundings. People had to stay home without travelling overseas as well as domestically. The situation has surely affected language learners' attitudes. Current university students were in junior high or senior high school at that time. It was time to start learning four skills on a full scale after entertaining education in elementary school. However, class activities were restricted. They attended online and interacted with classmates and teachers through a computer screen. Even if they went to school to have face-to-face

lessons, social distance gave them few opportunities to communicate with classmates. Therefore, they often studied individually. They also couldn't go on a school trip to a foreign country nor see tourists in their neighborhood. This environment influenced their mode of language learning. It is unfortunate for students to experience such an adolescence. During that difficult time, listening activities may have been given a lower priority. Studying grammar and vocabulary is more efficient in written exams for entrance into a higher-level school. Field (2008, p.334) states:

> At the moment, instructors tend to seriously underestimate the importance of listening practice. When they find themselves short of time, it is quite often the listening session that gets cut. Alternatively, listening is relegated to voluntary attendance in a language centre. To some extent, this attitude is understandable. Developing listening competence in learners can be frustrating. Progress is often slow and difficult to spot. Spoken language is less tangible and more difficult to handle than written.

Thus, they might have studied in haste to complete their school curriculums after they came back to school. It is not certain that students acquired sufficient aural or visual knowledge and skills in high school. Even though they study reading intensively, they often don't study grammar to the same degree. Some students fall into a bad habit of skimming instead of reading for deeper understanding. In other words, they simply predict the whole meaning on the basis of information from a few keywords. Meanwhile, other students are unconcerned about pronunciation even though they are proficient in grammar. They aren't able to read aloud accurately because of difficulty in identifying spelling with pronunciation.

How have learners been influenced by such a situation? There are probably students who are at a loss as to what to do because their comprehension isn't good enough. On the other hand, some students might have succeeded in learning individually instead of complaining about an unsatisfying educational environment. They must be eager to develop more skills. It is possible that there are such two extremes in the types of students at university nowadays. How should teachers give instruction? They require new strategies for this post-COVID-19 generation of students.

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Method

This paper will focus on a women's university in southern Japan. The participants are native Japanese speakers. An elective English phonetics course is open for second- to fourth-year students including those who take a junior high school and senior high school teaching course or childhood education. Some students have just come back to Japan after finishing an overseas program. Others are planning to study abroad in the following semester. It is a fifteen-week course in the second semester every year. The class is conducted in a CALL (computer-assisted language learning) classroom. There are approximately forty female students every year. They first have a warm-up activity of reading aloud and a short review of the last lesson. Then they start to learn elemental knowledge in a new unit. They are shown some details on a monitor with the teacher's explanation and listen to sound files through the ceiling speakers. After that, they work in pairs to communicate through headsets. They ask and answer each other by practicing reading out loud. They are randomly set in pairs through CALL in order to pronounce phonemes and make themselves understood without being able to see each other's face. Finally, they work individually to answer listening questions in exercises as a review at the end of the class.

Students have complaints about pronunciation at the beginning of the course despite wanting to be fluent speakers. They must have more issues that they haven't noticed yet. How much achievement can they accomplish in a semester? They should learn theory and practice to solve their problems: that is, make themselves familiar with phonetic symbols according to basic knowledge of phonetics and improve their pronunciation skills to do training in a limited amount of time.

These students will be compared to a second group. They are first-year students in compulsory four-skill courses. The classes are held in a typical classroom, not CALL. It is equipped with devices, including a projector, a disc player, an overhead camera, and a screen. Students are seated without a computer to take notes on paper materials. They usually learn a topic and vocabulary at the beginning of the lesson. Then they practice speaking in pairs such as mutual interviews and role-playing in conversations. They also practice listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar, perhaps in a different way from high school. Most students are generally willing to cooperate as peer learners. The students are in various majors, not English majors. Each department is divided into classes

according to their level of academic achievement, which allows students to share issues and satisfaction when they meet something challenging. They are instructed in English in class by native and non-native teachers.

The courses are conducted twice a week, in total, twenty-three hours a semester. Students are required to take two courses a semester, totaling four courses a year. They consequently learn English four days a week throughout the year. Some students continue to learn with effort whether they are interested in language learning or not. Others have a more passive attitude, and a few have negative feelings toward learning English. Fortunately, these latter students' negative attitude toward learning English can be improved when their peer learners are enthusiastic. Activities in pairs or groups function effectively in such a communicative environment. If they are comfortable in the class atmosphere, they can have a positive attitude toward English communication, and be positively motivated. However, if students don't feel comfortable communicating in English constantly, they will lose confidence and their attitude will be more negative. Teachers require suitable strategies for various types of students.

This paper includes two different styles of classes. Nevertheless, these courses share similarities because both include listening activities. Firstly, some tendencies in students' attitude will be described. Then incidental factors and possible reasons will be discussed. Finally, strategies will be suggested to discover solutions for students' weaknesses.

Analysis

There are a variety of listening activities. One of the most popular activities is multiple-choice questions. These questions can function as comprehension checks. Choices are prepared as pictures or sentences. Pictures often convey visual information of vocabulary or situations. It is usually seen at the beginning of a unit to introduce a topic. Another frequent type of multiple-choice question has four answer choices (A-D), or True/False. Students can try to answer by choosing one of them even if they are not fully confident in the answer.

In first-year students' courses, when they work individually, students mark a choice. However, when they are called to answer in front of their peers, they hesitate to speak aloud. It is too quiet for teachers to understand A, B, C, or D. When students read one of the four choices, they sound quite similar. They should pronounce [éɪ], [bíː], [síː], or [díː]. The

last three share a long vowel [iː] though the initials are different. It is common to mishear [b] and [d] frequently. Both are plosives. The former is a bilabial and the latter is an alveolar. These consonants share the same manner of articulation and their places of articulation are close as well. However, a fricative [s] is also difficult to identify when students whisper. Their pronunciation cannot produce sufficient explosion or friction at each of the three initials. They need to breathe deeply to inhale and exhale. Additionally, [éɪ] sometimes sounds close to these three letters. It is a diphthong which isn't shared with the others, but many students tend to pronounce it as if it were [éː]. Both [iː] and [éː] are front vowels, so it is predictable that the two long vowels are indistinguishable. As for True/False, when students answer, they often read the initials T/F. [tíː] and [éf] seem dissimilar, but the way to pronounce a plosive and fricative is very weak and unclear. These include front vowels as well, so they sometimes bear a resemblance when students murmur. If they read the whole words, the vowels have a resemblance. [uː] in True and [ɔː] in False are back vowels. It is possible that these can also be misheard.

There are two possible reasons why students speak quite quietly. First, they seem to feel self-conscious and consider it shameful to answer incorrectly. Underwood (1989, p.28) suggests to give "a period when students discuss their responses, in pairs/groups, and help each other with the task" after listening. This opportunity aids them in solving their problems by exchanging ideas. If they can't come to a consensus as a group, they surely have a sympathy that the questions are challenging. Teachers should also relieve them from such fear by showing a positive attitude to them even if they answer incorrectly. Another reason they speak in a small voice might be that people made a habit of wearing masks that fit over their mouth and nose. We probably hesitate to take deep breaths unconsciously. The pandemic has affected our daily lives in many ways.

As for questions without choices, fill-in-the-blank questions for partial dictation are common. In a dialogue or monologue, there are some spaces with underlines or brackets for missing words. Students are inclined to skip this type of question, compared with multiple-choice ones. When they are not confident, they don't write in the answers. Some students answer only one or a few letters which is usually a component of the missing word. They try to write it tentatively when they perceive vowels or consonants. Others, particularly non-English majors, write in Japanese when they can't spell quickly. If the sound file is played repeatedly, they often succeed to complete the whole word. Students

can also predict the missing words according to context such as a topic of a passage and grammatical information. Thus, they have a tendency to apply what they hear to spellings. They sometimes fail by replacing similar words or creating words. Punctuation errors are sometimes found, such as not capitalizing at the beginning of a sentence and dropping an apostrophe for a contracted form.

The letters written tentatively might be stressed syllables. As for vowels, students tend to think it difficult to distinguish vowels such as [ə], [ɑ], [æ], [ʌ], and [ɔ]. It is probably because such vowels are usually substituted as a letter of *a* in Japanese. The alphabet *u* is used for [u] in Japanese language, such as *sumo* and *tofu*, which might confuse Japanese speakers. Learners constantly compare English with their first language (Japanese) unconsciously. It is natural that learners should be confused when they meet such vowels unique to English.

There are also several consonants which are described by phonetic symbols quite differently from the alphabet. Particularly, [ʒ], [θ], and [ð] seem difficult to understand because there is a gap between phonetic symbols and spellings. Moreover, the difference of English and Japanese can bring some errors. Students seem to be confused by the difference between pronunciation and spelling in English. They often compare English with Japanese so that they sometimes transcribe words in the same way as romaji. Some phonemes have variations of spelling such as [f] in *fish*, *photo*, and *enough*. Some mistakes can occur as misspelling even though students correctly identify the word aurally.

On the other hand, they need to be cautious about similar vowels in Japanese. The contrast between [iː] and [ɪ] can show lack of stability. It means that students can differentiate between long and short vowels although their performance is prone to being influenced by context in a passage. The difference between them is not only the length, but also the quality, that is, the former is a tense vowel while the latter is a lax vowel. Learners should observe phonemes more carefully. Let us see more examples in the following.

Additionally, it is expected to recognize certain consonants such as [p], [b], [w], [t], [s], [k], and [g]. These consonants are often spelled and pronounced in the similar way in Japanese language, but the quality is not the same. In English, plosives can be followed by aspiration. They are pronounced with more energy that causes additional air just before the stressed vowels. This suggests that these consonants can be comparatively easy to recognize.

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Moreover, consonant clusters don't appear in Japanese language. A consonant is generally followed by a vowel, for instance, *sukiyaki* and *karaoke*. Togo (2009) states that consonant clusters can be difficult for Japanese speakers in learning English as well as a factor in hindering actual oral communication (pp.64-65). In fact, some students speak in a strong Japanese accent. It means they add a vowel to every consonant. Some students mispronounce [dz]. Most cases show that they can't identified [dz] and [z] in *cards/cars*, but another peculiar pattern can be discussed. When they read a word which ends with *d* and *-s* of a plural or the third person singular present form, [o] is uncommonly added between them. For instance, *cards* could be pronounced as [ka:doz]. This can be heard on very rare occasions, but not zero, especially in non-English majors.

Missing words in questions tend to be content words rather than function words. Inflected forms or contracted forms are also troublesome. In a listening activity, a monologue or a conversation is continuously played without interruption. Students have to write answers quickly. Even if students have knowledge about grammar, they might not be able to think carefully during such activities. They can probably guess the function of the missing words but they have a tendency to be less cautious about tense and voice such as *-ing* or *-ed*.

Not only phonemes but also supra-segmental phonemes could be related to the difficulty. The ending parts are often combined with the following word as linking. Some students seem to be confused by linking with the following word and fail to perceive individual words in a series. They probably have difficulty in finding boundaries between words, so they regard the combination of the following word as one word. It is also significant where the blank is positioned in a sentence. The middle of sentences can be affected by the preceding and following words while the beginning or ending of a sentence seems simple to comprehend. Students are prone to concentrating on the beginning part while the ending is sonorous. When one word itself is pronounced, students can focus on observing details. The ending can resonate without any words following.

If materials include quizzes of dictating phrases or sentences, it is possible to acquire some features of supra-segmental phonemes. On the other hand, misspelling is avoidable if students are more cautious. Notwithstanding their need to improve skills in grammar and vocabulary, some errors can be decreased by answering more carefully. Some homonyms like *sea/see* can be distinguished if they pay attention. Students also require diligence and

concentration. When they are given time till the end of class to work for these activities, they are allowed to listen to sound files repeatedly or pinpoint some parts by stopping and playing. They should make best use of their environment and the time available.

One can infer that another reason is according to a degree of recognition. If a missing word is less familiar to students, it is natural that they may not be able to answer appropriately. Adopting materials is one of the most significant jobs for teachers. They ought to assess the degree of students' achievement in advance. It should be not too easy, not too difficult. Students could be encouraged to complete activities with proper satisfaction. Yet unfair challenges tend to demotivate them. The degree is related mainly to vocabulary and topics, that is to say, according to relevance and acceptability. It is important that keywords for missing parts are familiar to students or introduced as examples they learn in the previous pages. Particularly, listening materials should be investigated in advance, for instance, about speed and length of listening tracks. Field (2008, p.75) offers the following suggestion:

> Perhaps the most important recommendation is that teachers should aim to ensure a closer match between the type of text and the way in which learners are asked to handle it. One of the marks of a competent listener is the ability to match listening type to current demands.

A typical mistake can occur when students answer on a computer. They first listen and write answers on paper, and then input the answers to the question on the computer screen. They sometimes mistype by skipping or adding a letter, shuffling the order of the letters, or touching another key close on the keyboard. Such mistakes can be avoided if they are given sufficient time to type at their own pace without working hastily. It is necessary that teachers should be timekeepers if it is a self-study activity. Students need to play and stop sound files. As Underwood (1989, p.17) insists:

> One of the merits of doing listening work in a language laboratory, or listening centre, is that the students can be given the opportunity to control their own machines and proceed in whatever way they wish, going back over parts they want to hear again as often as they feel necessary, or pressing on and forcing themselves to listen at the

speed of the recording.

On the other hand, in listening through ceiling speakers, all students work simultaneously. Teachers can handle with sound files. Underwood (1989, p.17) points out as follows:

> … in many learning and teaching situations the decision about whether or not to replay a recording or a section of a recording is not in the hands of the learner. In a class situation, it is generally the teacher who declares 'That was rather difficult. Let's listen again.' It is extremely hard for the teacher to judge whether or not the students have understood any particular section of what they have heard and so it is possible that the tape will be stopped at times when there is no need to stop it and not stopped when it might be useful to do so.

One possible idea is that they can take intervals between sentences. A passage or a dialogue usually lasts for a certain period in a track. Some students are neat and slow in taking notes. Others can't spell words in English quickly. If they need more time to work on paper, it is effective to stop playing the listening material for a while between questions, for instance, just after blanks. If the pause is too long, it wouldn't be helpful because it can prevent students from comprehending context. A stream of speech is significant as well as students' concentration. Such a short pause enables students to pay attention. If they fail at the beginning part, they seem to give up trying soon. Such an extra pause stimulates them to keep working until the end. Listening (as well as reading) activities can be regarded passive compared with speaking and writing. However, fill-in-the-blank questions offer the opportunity to write words. Students are required to keep concentrating on their work actively while they are listening. To concentrate, it is certain that headsets are much more effective than ceiling speakers. Wearing a headset intercepts noise, so it is operative in phonetical observation such as distinguishing phonemes. However, noise usually accompanies our daily life, including rain, thunder, footsteps, and cars. Listening from loudspeakers is an essential training. It enables students to better simulate real life compared to wearing headsets. Teachers can choose a device according to activities. It is beneficial that students experience a mixture of these strategies.

Students may have dreams of being fluent English speakers. They won't suddenly become fluent without any effort as if they were born in an English speaking country. They

need to find what to do at the present moment. There could be some, several, or many steps to improve their skills. When they learn pronunciation skills, they need to listen carefully, practice speaking, learn to read phonetic symbols, and finally transcribe words through essential knowledge of phonetics. It also requires them to learn linguistics including syntax, morphology, semantics, and lexicology. When we learn a language, we should take diverse approaches. As for the way to adopt strategies, Flowerdew and Miller (2005, pp.80-81) insist as follows:

> In any consideration of how best to develop effective listening skills in students, some attention must be given to how students learn, their preferred styles, and what strategies they employ. Although learning styles rely to some extent on personality, there are ways in which teachers can introduce their students to other styles and then allow the students to decide which method works best.

It takes time and effort without shortcuts to acquire a language. Learners will be successful after trial and error is often repeated. Teachers can assist them in granting learners' success through observing their current situation and giving advice as much as possible. According to Hughes (1981, p.6), "Language is a tool and not a museum exhibit. As such one of its primary functions is to communicate information." In classrooms, collecting correct answers is not a goal. Students are encouraged to comprehend what the speaker says, and get ready for interaction as speakers as well. Underwood (1989, pp.4-5) indicates that "The main aim of oral language teaching is generally to enable our students to participate fully and comfortably in conversations, both as speakers and as listeners." Teachers are expected to play a role of leading students to experience communicative language learning.

Conclusion

As this study has shown, there are several features of listening activities. Multiple-choice questions allow students to answer something. It means they can avoid no answers. It works effectively as a warm-up activity, but it is sometimes difficult to estimate students' comprehension accurately. In the meantime, one advantage and disadvantage of partial dictation is that students depend on context. They seem to comprehend a topic,

take advantage of grammatical information, and then verify the sound they hear. They can also find words using a dictionary once they are allowed to work at their own pace. Consequently, they can generally answer correctly. However, they sometimes fail to predict and analyze words. They misunderstand a topic, have difficulty in grammar, or create new words without careful investigation. Students often depend on their first language. Some English phonemes are unfamiliar to Japanese speakers. It is also because they need to understand only through oral information without watching the speaker's face. Listening can be categorized as a passive activity, but students have to pay attention all the time to think and take notes. Teachers can help them by preparing proper materials and learning environment, playing the role of timekeepers, and observing students' attitude to give them advice. Students are surely stimulated to deliver a better performance.

This study is merely an overview of listening activities in actual class, mainly referring to partial dictation in a passage or a dialogue. It is essential to collect more details to make discovery through concrete practice. In the future, it could be valuable to analyze results of dictation of full sentences because this type of question has no printed information. This means that there are no hints from reading context, so students have to dictate all words from the listening exercise. Although the rates of correct answers might be lower than partial dictation, it might give more interesting data by comparing various sentence styles such as short and simple ones to longer and complicated sentences. Another future research direction could compare content words and function words. Dictation can collect various sorts of information which shows students' characteristics in language learning including listening skills, vocabulary, and grammar. Such information should be utilized as practical education in order to satisfy students' demand and identify and correct their weaknesses.

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