

Original Article

A Report on Listening Strategies, Materials and Methods in a University Advanced Listening & Speaking Class

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Abstract: This brief narrative examines materials and methods used in a university advanced listening class. It reports on the introduction and implementation of language learner strategies and confirms the improvement of learners' listening abilities as recorded in the results of a pre and posttest. Recommendations for improving methods and materials are provided.

Key Words: listening strategies, listening process, bottom up, top down, comprehension

This paper examines the materials and methods used in an Advanced Listening class conducted at a public university in western Japan. In doing so, it reviews the use of explicit and integrated instruction of listening strategies and compares pre and post test results of an accepted instrument used to evaluate second language learners' listening strengths and weaknesses.

The challenges confronted in designing this class included what material to use, what medium to employ to deliver content, and how students might best improve their listening skills. As previously reported, the use of direct and indirect learning strategies proposed by Rebecca Oxford (10) aids in increasing knowledge and improving retention of subject matter (7). Therefore one of the first steps taken was to locate and read as much as possible about the use of learning strategies for listening. Most of the articles read demonstrated a link between explicit instruction in learning strategies

and improved listening skills (4, 2, 12). Following the recommendation of Chamot (3, 4), I decided to incorporate instruction in listening learning strategies as part of the course. The obvious question to confront was which strategies? What specific areas should be emphasized?

In order to limit the listening strategy instruction and lessons to the particular problems encountered by the students in this class, the Clear Listening Test, found in a popular pronunciation and listening textbook, *Clear Speech* by Judy Gilbert (5) was chosen. This test was administered in the second class, after most changing of classes by students in this elective course had been completed. It was also administered in last class of the semester so that I could record any changes after 13 lessons and a fairly large amount of homework.

The test is divided into seven sections, each one addressing a distinct listening and pronunciation skill that may cause problems for second language learners. The sections of the test are (a) sounds, (b) syllable number, (c) word stress, (d) contractions and reductions, (e) identification and emphasis, (f) meaning, and (g) thought groups. The results of the pretest indicated that not all of these seven areas needed work. The word stress section produced the highest

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average score: 9.43 of 10. Therefore we did not devote time to introducing strategies or distinct practice for this area. The same applied to the sounds section since the average score here was 8.21 of 10. It should be noted that in the first class, before the pretest was given, we did practice identifying sounds in general as well as distinct spoken sounds. Sections with an average score of below 70% were areas deemed to warrant instruction.

The lowest scores were in the contractions and reductions section. The class average was 3.96 of a possible 10. It should be noted that in the original test version this section is worth 20 points, so 3.96 is quite a poor score. Recognizing syllable counts and breaks followed with a score of 6.14 of 10. Selecting emphasized words also had somewhat poor results with a score of 6.46 of 10. The averages given may be a bit deceptive as individual total scores ranged from 34 to 67 of 70 possible points.

The test results appeared to validate observations from activities we did in the very first class. Students watched a brief 20-second clip from The Simpsons television program where the expression "well into her 70s" was used four times with a differing stress each time. After listening a few times, it was still difficult for students to recognize the differences in meaning caused by stressing different words and syllables. This problem stemmed from both not recognizing the emphasis and only knowing two uses of *well* (healthy and as the adverbial form of the adjective good). In the same class students had little difficulty in identifying distinct sounds or phonemes.

In the second class students were provided with a checklist (Table a) of explicit listening strategy points for pre and post-listening (11). The purpose was to raise students' awareness of decisions that are often made unconsciously or not at all when listening to speech. Such self-awareness is a fundamental tenet of effective implementation of learning strategies (4, 9, 10). After checking that the students understood each item on the list, we used the list with an in-class activity. As a follow up the students used it with their listening homework that week. Students were encouraged to incorporate the use of this list into their listening both in and out of class. We used it directly in class on only one other occasion.

For the next few lessons the class devoted time to

(Table a)

Before listening	√
I understand the task (what I need to do after I have finished listening)	
I know what I must pay attention to while listening	
I have attempted to recall all that I know about the topic	
I have attempted to recall all the type of information I am likely to hear	
I have made predictions on what I am about to hear	
I am ready to pay attention and concentrate	
I have attempted to recall all that I know about the topic	
I have encouraged myself	
After Listening	
I concentrated on the task to be accomplished	
I tried to verify my predictions	
I focused my attention on the information needed to complete the task	
I used my world knowledge to help me guess the bits I did not understand:	
- my knowledge of English	
- tone of voice	
- key words	
- context	
- other	
I used my knowledge to infer information not directly mentioned in the text	
- my knowledge of English	
- other	
In order to improve my listening performance next time I will	

working on specific listening problems and strategies. In one class we examined how to identify potential problems and causes of them with an emphasis on listening for note taking. Some of these activities focused on numerical figures misheard, total lack of comprehension, and better understanding at the start of a passage than at the middle or end. This work allowed students to recognize that there are many factors that affect their listening and some of them are beyond their control. They also came to realize that they can make adjustments to improve listening ability in certain situations.

In one lesson, the emphasis was on following the rhythm of speech by syllable counting and recognition. In another class we practiced reduced speech and contractions. In still another, we examined why one word was stressed above others in a sentence. In each instance this work took no more than the first third to half of the class time. For continued outside

independent practice students received an annotated list of URLs for online listening. The material on these sites ranged from low beginner to advanced levels. Thus, everyone in the class could find something to listen to corresponding to their ability.

In addition to the teaching and application of discrete learning strategies, five concepts (14) about listening were introduced to the class and students discussed them among themselves. Students were informed that these concepts would guide future classes.

We tend to focus on product rather than process; student misses, teacher replays the passage.

We all listen differently... we have different interests and reasons for listening... we listen with different degrees of concentration... what we listen to affects how we listen.

Classroom listening often involves artificial disembodied voices that the listener cannot stop, control, question, or interact with in any meaningful way. This is why the class was assigned pair work as an adjunct activity to listening.

In real life situations listening plays a very active and important role in keeping conversations alive... roles quickly shift from listener to speaker and back.

Student expectations are very often unrealistic... native speakers often listen at only 25% of their potential and ignore, forget, distort or misunderstand the other 75% of what is heard. Concentration increases with interest level, but it never reaches 100%.

From the outset we attempted to concentrate on the listening process and not worry so much about the end result. My assumption being that comprehension would improve with more exposure to comprehensible input along with an understanding of the listening process. With this in mind we reviewed a list of listening skills and strategies assembled from *Listening* by Goodith White (14). These included recognizing certain discourse markers and using them to aid in predicting what would follow. For example, 'in fact' (examples follow or elaboration of a previously stated idea), 'so' (expect to hear results) and 'but'

(precedes contrasts or contradictory opinions). We also worked with using gestures and facial expressions to help to establish meaning as well as using prior knowledge as an aid in discovering meaning. Another tactic taught was recognizing the differences in listening for gist and listening for specific information and when each may be important. One further area discussed and practiced was how the listener interacts with the speaker. To do this we practiced how to deal with speed, accent and intonation differences, how to determine the speaker's mood and intention, and when and how to change the subject. Due to time constraints these topics were not addressed to the extent that I would have liked. The fact that this class was titled Advanced Listening with Speaking allowed us to spend a portion of each class doing pair work and not just listening to recorded conversations or watching videos. A problem encountered with the pair work activities was that a number of the pairs sped through the exercises as though they were a competition to see who could finish first, rather than using the opportunity to communicate on a higher level and discuss more in English.

When planning this course I decided that listening outside of class would be necessary and homework would comprise a substantial part of student grades. There were two reasons for this decision. First, students needed the reinforcement that further structured listening practice could provide. And, second, it would be very difficult to assess individual work in a class of 33 students. For the homework assignments each student received two CDs containing Voice of America (VOA) (13) reports on topics considered to be of interest to the students, a few songs and other listening resources. Each week the students received a handout to complete after listening to the corresponding recording on the CD. The homework consisted of cloze activities, comprehension questions with open answers and answering questions about personal opinions and actions related to the topic of the VOA broadcast. For example, after listening to a story about search engines and SPAM and completing a cloze exercise, students then answered questions about their own search habits and use computers for learning. Whenever possible, parts of the homework were designed to help personalize the topic in order to bring make the

assignment more meaningful to each individual student.

In general, the homework assignments increased in length and difficulty as the semester progressed. Special English broadcasts from VOA were routinely used, but in one instance a regular VOA story was mistakenly provided and it proved too difficult for most of the class, mainly due to the speaker's speed. Still, the positive outcomes were emphasized when the assignment was reviewed in class. It provided a good opportunity to discuss reasons why students found it hard, and to praise the fact that the gist of the story could be understood without being able to understand all details and vocabulary. As it so happened, this story was one where prior knowledge was lacking for most of the class.

For the final two meetings we experimented with extensive listening. The material used was the CD of a Cambridge graded reader, *Strong Medicine* by Richard Macandrew (8). I selected this because many students had indicated they liked mystery stories and a number of them were from the Medical and Dental faculties. The story setting is a research laboratory and the plot involves medical research and ethics. This book is a level 3 (lower-intermediate) reader and was a finalist in the 2007 Extensive Reading Foundation's Language Learner Literature Awards adolescent and adult category.

In the first extensive listening lesson each student had a map and character list and the story setting and character roles were provided before listening. Unlike other tasks throughout the semester, we listened only once to each passage. To keep attention focused and have at least a small degree of interactivity after weeks of pair work after listening tasks, I asked comprehension and prediction questions at appropriate intervals of the text. This questioning took place after every 3–5 minutes of narration. It took a bit longer than I had anticipated to elicit answers. This meant that in the second class, we were forced to listen to longer segments in order to finish the story, as it was the last class of the semester.

The overall reception was positive. It was easy to see who was using top down skills more as those were the students who were actively engaged in listening and following the story as it developed. To my surprise, only a few in the class appeared to be unin-

terested. If repeated in a future class, a slightly shorter book is recommended. This would allow more time to discuss strategies implemented and to listen in shorter segments.

Before the extensive listening activity in the final lesson, students took the Clear Listening Test once again. The results of the post-test were very positive. The Mann-Whitney rank sums test indicates a significant difference between pre and post-test scores when measuring and combining results for all categories $p < 0.0362$.

Interestingly an area which we naturally focused on, although the pre-test score was over 70 %, was meaning. Comparisons of section "f" in pre and post testing indicated a significant measured increase in understanding for the class as a whole. The Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis Test shows a significant increase in score sum and score mean. A 2-sample test shows $p < 0.0172$ and the 1-way test Chi-Square results show $p < 0.0166$. Both tests confirm a significant increase in the ability of students to comprehend what they heard after 13 lessons.

While it cannot be assumed that the improvement was due to the use of learning strategies, the post-test results are nonetheless encouraging. In future classes the homework could be scaffolded better so that the length and difficulty of the pieces progressed more evenly and build upon previous work better. An increased use of video is recommended, so students could determine the context more easily, better infer meaning from unknown vocabulary and see gestures and expressions. Providing visual cues not only improves understanding, but also enhances motivation (Brown, 2007). It is also less artificial. In addition, more ongoing use of the checklist and monitoring of its results would be beneficial for the students, as it would further increase awareness of strategy use. Also a better method of monitoring individual's use of strategies and progress from bottom up to top down should be devised to help personalize feedback. This class proved to be a positive learning experience for all participants; students and instructor alike.

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(Table b)

Oneway Anova
Analysis of Variance

Source	DF	Sum of Squares	Mean Square	F Ratio	Prob > F
admin	1	13.09090 9	13.0909	6.7803	0.0127
Error	42	81.09090 9	1.9307		
C. Total	43	94.18181 8			

Means for Oneway Anova

Level	Number	Mean	Std Error	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
post	22	9.18182	0.29624	8.5840	9.7797
pre	22	8.09091	0.29624	7.4931	8.6888

Std Error uses a pooled estimate of error variance

Wilcoxon/Kruskal-Wallis Tests (Rank Sums)

Level	Count	Score Sum	Score Mean	(Mean-Mean0)/Std0
post	22	588.5	26.7500	2.382
pre	22	401.5	18.2500	-2.382

2-Sample Test, Normal Approximation

S	Z	Prob > Z
401.5	-2.38236	0.0172

1-way Test, ChiSquare Approximation

ChiSquare	DF	Prob > ChiSq
5.7368	1	0.0166

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