

## Criteria For Listening Materials

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Listening texts are often prepared with what seems to be little regard for the students they will be used with. Recordings of largely written texts or scripted dialogues work on the unquestioned assumption that materials should encourage students to listen carefully to each sound of a long and meticulously-edited text with the purpose of answering a battery of questions concerning often-times minute and trivial details. This paper examines some of the problems which students—and Japanese students in particular—face when using this type of listening material. Based on specific learner traits, a set of criteria is proposed which may serve as a framework for the production of materials better suited to the needs of Japanese students.

### Learner Characteristics

In assessing the particular listening needs of Japanese students, it may be helpful at first to note some characteristics of Japanese foreign language learners as a whole and areas which seem to present them with the greatest problems. It should be noted that whatever specific claims made about Japanese students may also pertain to other learner groups and it is only the degree to which we can apply these characteristics which distinguishes Japanese students as a separate group. I will suggest that among the general tendencies displayed by Japanese learners, it may be said that they:

1. are easily discouraged with partial comprehension.
2. focus unduly on individual grammar and lexical items.
3. lack cultural background of the target language.
4. are reluctant to seek clarification.

1. We expect some degree of discouragement from any group of learners at not being able to fully comprehend a spoken or written message. Learners cannot expect to develop the type of skills necessary to interpret written or spoken texts without ever encountering new or problematic material. But despite the obvious fact that learners may become discouraged with material semantically or lexically above their level, the question of how learners deal with the various difficulties they face in a text can often have an equally important effect on the level of discouragement they feel when failing to comprehend. Most efficient readers, for example, have been found simply to sample texts by focusing only on items relevant to their immediate purposes. Material which is edited out or skimmed over may include difficult semantic or lexical items that the reader does not see as essential to a cursory understanding of the text. Even when a reading passage contains an abundance of unknown material, efficient readers might still be expected to read on at a limited level of understanding in order to glean what they can.

Language learners in Japan appear to receive little practice with this type of reading or listening strategy. Reasons for this lack of training become apparent when we consider methods used by a majority of language instructors at the secondary school level which employ strict word-by-word translation to the exclusion of more holistic approaches. If, as some have claimed, students do not consider that a passage has been read or understood until it is fully rendered into Japanese (Hino 1988), then reading or listening in a foreign language will necessarily require extended periods of time for students to complete these tasks. Reading and listening in this view, will always be done in piecemeal fashion, word by word or sentence by sentence. It should be clear then, that students accustomed to progressing in this manner, will find difficulties when faced with heavy reading loads or with sentences read in quick succession as in narratives, lectures or dialogues.

If students insist on following this pattern of text translation while listening to a passage read at natural, or near natural speed, they will inevitably be forced to stop at various points in order to verify what they are rushing to put into Japanese. As the listener shifts focus, whatever follows in the passage will be lost and coherence with other parts of the text will gradually become less apparent. Insistence on a complete understanding of a listening passage, is therefore neither necessary nor always desirable and may often lead to the feelings of discouragement we have discussed.

2. This dissatisfaction with less than total comprehension of a text is closely related to an exclusive focus on isolated lexical items and grammar points. Due again in large part to the emphasis on discrete point grammar tests and the detached study of various word "specimens" removed from any context, many students fail to fully utilize contextual clues within a reading or listening passage to help determine the immediate significance of a grammar point or lexical item. Since few words can be said to have independent meaning outside of a specific context, this bias towards what has been called "bottom-up" processing appears to present many Japanese learners with difficulties in discovering contextual coherence. Spoken English, with its false starts, pauses and compounded anaphoric usages, does not easily lend itself to the discrete analysis so common to many language classrooms in Japan.

3. An obvious difference in learner perspectives is the cultural distance from the language one is learning. The content of a text, if unfamiliar to the student, may render even grammatically simple texts incomprehensible and obscure meanings of new words that might otherwise be made apparent through context. Textual coherence as we have mentioned earlier is an element essential to the ability of a listener or reader to fit the parts of a passage or discourse together and thus to derive meaning. Native speakers of any language naturally

possess more complex cultural (as well as contextual) schemata of their own languages than non-native speakers, and so tend to make the associations that writers or speakers intend. Students more familiar with the culture to which a text refers will be more likely to pick up on the type of implicit assumptions writers and speakers commonly make. Thus, EFL students will have certain advantages over EFL students due to the greater accessibility of the second language culture.

Despite the increased exposure of many students in Japan to elements of western culture, there remain considerable areas about which little is understood. If we exclude the most frequently cited examples of popular culture such as the fact that many Westerners wear their shoes in the house or kiss in public, then we are left with an abundance of knowledge about the cultural bases for these customs for which students have few answers. If learners are expected to "read into" texts, they can only do so by drawing on the relevant schemata available to them. If these schemata are culturally incomplete, students cannot hope to make the required associations.

4. Studies of feedback strategies among young LI learners point to the failure of using appropriate conversation management language as one characteristic of unsuccessful listeners (Robinson 1981). Young learners often do not realize at which point or why a misunderstanding has occurred and frequently seem to discount the speaker as a possible source of the miscommunication (Ironsmith and Whitehurst 1978). Second language learners, and Japanese students in particular, appear to exhibit similar difficulties in recognizing the source of a miscommunication and a reluctance to seek some kind of clarification. This problem is compounded in Japanese classrooms where the teacher is quite often the only source of input. Japanese students are rarely encouraged to question an instructor or to reveal when they have failed to understand. This frequently leads to

awkwardness when Japanese learners fail to indicate that they have misunderstood and their speaking partner proceeds unaware of the fact.

### **Listening objectives**

Having now discussed some of the broad difficulties faced by many Japanese learners, we can now attempt to determine how these characteristics specifically affect student abilities with listening texts. Based on the four learner characteristics reviewed in the previous section, I will propose that listening materials designed specifically for Japanese students should minimally attempt to meet the following four objectives :

- 1) To encourage success by reassuring students that total comprehension is neither obtainable nor seldom necessary.
- 2) To improve interactive abilities to listen for both details and main points in a text.
- 3) To provide culturally relevant background.
- 4) To increase awareness of the options available when comprehension problems occur.

### **Ensuring success**

Unless students experience some continued success with listening, the kinds of skills which we have discussed earlier as characteristic of effective listeners will be slow to emerge. Students will begin to feel more confident with these editing procedures — choosing which material to focus on and which to disregard — only when they are broken of the habit of constantly translating each separate word into Japanese. This can be done efficiently with the types of listening tasks that invite students to venture guesses about the text using both their own knowledge of the listening scenario and contextual clues drawn from the material itself.

Through lexical and grammatical grading of the tasks students

are asked to perform, the percentage of correctly made guesses can be kept sufficiently high to prevent students from being distracted by extra material that, because of time limitations, they have been unable to translate. As students become aware that they are making progress without exhaustive translation, the instructor can increase the percentage of new material in each task. Materials which allow students to proceed with a minimum of failure, will necessarily strengthen the hypothesis-making and testing abilities all native speakers use in listening to their own languages. Through success-oriented materials, it is hoped that Japanese students will more readily accept that the total comprehension of a text is rarely necessary.

### **Developing interactive listening skills**

As mentioned in the previous section, the exclusive focus on discrete-point grammar prevalent in many Japanese schools tends to narrow a student's field of concentration to a specific sentence, word or even sound. If this becomes the norm in listening, the rapid speech of a native speaker will naturally seem incomprehensible and, as a matter of course, there will be a high rate of failure. Without the ability to somehow widen the field of listening in order to grasp the general meaning of a text, listeners will most likely perceive a series of disconnected words and sounds. Asking students to listen for the main idea of a text is thus both a means of increasing the ability to make inferences and, in doing so, encouraging students not simply to give up when they fail to catch each and every word. Some measure of confidence can be expected when students discover that they can, in fact, follow the outlines of a text. The ability to make phonemic or even segmental contrasts, although an important component skill, can be practiced initially in isolation from these more top-down tasks.

While attempting to overcome the bias towards the bottom-up

processing students generally receive, it cannot be ignored that initial sensory input is received in the form of individual sounds and words and must be processed before meaning can begin to take shape. What has been determined by test-makers as the distinct skills of "listening for gist" as opposed to "listening for detail" might actually be regarded as two parts of a single process in which these skills are interlinked and ultimately inseparable. Listening in a variety of situations requires us to employ both of these ways of processing in a mutually supportive manner. It is unfortunate that the confusion of these different processes has resulted in tasks which ask students to practice one type of processing on texts which would normally be processed in the opposite manner. Asking students for the scant details of a text in which the speakers are communicating for wholly social purposes with little actual exchange of information, is an example of how tasks and texts are often mismatched.

Based on this argument then, it would appear that effective materials should contain tasks requiring an interactive use of both processing methods. Even so, much of the recorded material accompanying texts often designated as "tapes for listening comprehension" still disappoint. Since the desire to isolate component skills is the dominant influence in the production of these recordings, students are frequently exposed to edited and highly scripted versions of conversations which have been stripped of the very elements that might help to develop genuinely interactive listening skills. There appears to be a stubborn resistance to the introduction of authentic listening materials due to an insistence by many instructors that students want and need to understand every detail of a text. Many non-native speaking instructors are also, understandably perhaps, reluctant to use materials with which they have difficulties themselves.

## **Cultural context**

It has been suggested that in many cases much of a student's failure with listening texts derives less from a lack of linguistic skills than from problems associated with the specific cultural or subject content of the text (Carrell 1987). If this is so, then what students are eventually tested on will occasionally have more to do with their knowledge of the particular subject of the listening materials than their listening abilities as such. Many texts that claim to be written specifically for Japanese students, while preparing the grammatical and lexical groundwork for listening exercises, still overlook basic cultural inferences as a possible source of confusion. Short discussions or reading passages about these underlying cultural assumptions, could help students in the guess-making process essential for effective listening. Pre-listening activities of this sort help activate relevant cultural schemata thus allowing listeners the freedom to concentrate more fully on other critical parts of a text.

## **Encouraging feedback**

Except for times when we listen to public speakers or programs broadcast on radio or television, we are normally in a position to require that speakers clarify themselves. We use such expressions as "What did you say?" or we repeat what the speaker has said in order to ensure that we have properly understood a message. If listeners are constantly put in the passive role of an overhearer in which they never utilize this type of comprehension checking, then we are not allowing them the same benefits we take for granted in normal discourse. Many learners, and Japanese language students in particular, seem to view misunderstandings as a result of some lack of effort on their part, rather than as an inherent part of communication. As with many young learners, they fail to consider the importance of message quality upon comprehension and to realize

that miscommunications are caused at various times by both speaker and listener.

Feedback is therefore an essential part of the negotiation of meaning, and as such should be considered along with the other criteria we have described as a basic factor when constructing listening materials. Tasks which ask listeners to isolate reasons for misunderstanding and to determine appropriate ways of clarifying can be devised to train students in this essential skill. The clarification language thus derived can then be used in further listening activities to request additional information and even to ask the instructor to stop the recording and play it back again.

### **General guidelines for listening materials**

Besides the four areas we have outlined in the above section, I feel there are a number of standard criteria by which all effective listening materials should be evaluated regardless of the intended users. Foremost among these is the focus of the material itself. Much of what passes for "challenging" listening material tends to pose less of a challenge to student's listening abilities than to their talents for memorizing the details of a text. The concept of validity in testing attempts to ensure that the results of a test reflect a student's true ability in a specific area without being influenced by associated, but separate skills. A focus specifically on listening skills is just this: it is listening, not speaking, reading or writing that is being practised. One or another of the four skills may need to be included in any exercise, but if listening is the skill we are asking students to practise, then that is where the emphasis should be placed. This is critical if tests are later used for evaluation, and precautions are necessary to avoid the assessment of writing or speaking abilities along with listening skills.

Whether or not testing is used for evaluation, the distinction between testing and training should also be kept in mind when

preparing listening materials. Test taking, just as any other learned behavior, is a skill which can be regarded as separate from the content of the test itself. Listening materials, if intended to develop the skills that we have so far discussed, should take care not simply to test students' current abilities while doing little to actually develop the skills nominally being tested. Testing, useful perhaps in providing a motivation for some students, is not the same as training, and materials composed exclusively of listening tests, can hardly be expected to enhance listening skills.

## Conclusion

In establishing the criteria outlined in this paper, the aim has been kept wide in order to include areas that may have been covered in other lists (such as Richard's which deals with learners in general and which gives a more comprehensive breakdown of skills). It is felt that any criteria will either be too broad and encompass many separate sub-skills, or conversely, too narrowly defined thereby becoming a mere list of micro-skills. I have attempted to reach a common denominator between these two with the four general categories concerning partial comprehension, interaction, cultural context and clarification.

Working with Japanese students, it frequently appears that much of what causes difficulties for these learners derives from previous methods of language study. The focus on translation and discrete point grammar testing which forms the basis of most instruction at the secondary school level, along with reluctance to seek clarification, make for a learning environment not always suited to the holistic procedures suggested here. What might be called for then, is an increase in learner training aimed at effectively "undoing" some of the habits formed during earlier years of language study. Listening materials, based on the ideas offered here might serve as a first step toward this end.

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