REAL WORLD LISTENING IN THE JAPANESE CLASSROOM AND ITS LINK TO SPEAKING

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Like language students elsewhere, Japanese learners of English bring unconscious assumptions to their study which are essentially projections of the behavioral patterns of their native tongue. In a variety of settings—from meeting someone for the first time to addressing a gathering of fellow workers—Japanese is an unusually formulaic language. In many contexts, prescribed expressions and sentiments follow, in a somewhat predictable pattern, one after another. In such a communicative setting, a participant often needs only catch the drift of what comes before in order to respond with the appropriate rejoinder at the acceptable level of formality.

Many Japanese students believe that lack of vocabulary, shortage of useful (formulaic) expresions, and poor command of grammar all combine to hold them back from improving their speaking ability. Shyness and embarassment at making mistakes are also cited as barriers to more effective oral communication. In short, students feel handicapped by their inability to plug the proper words and patterns into the right linguistic formulas, as they are used to doing in their native tongue. To suggest to them that the remedy for poor speaking might be better listening skills—which in effect means mastering the rich interplay of what precedes and follows a given utterance or set of utterances—can elicit a blank uncomprehending stare.

When listening is taught in Japanese high schools and universities, the focus of instruction is usually listening for details : absorbing chunks of information for recall when asked to answer questions on a comprehension test. The listening training of students—if they receive any—is devoted to piecemeal, almost mechanical comprehension. Little distinction is made between participatory and non-participatory listening, or between listening for topics and listening for how speaker intentions are expressed. Furthermore, students are seldom taught to listen for turn-taking tactics, and how one can in fact CHOOSE to respond to what others say.

Given this state of affairs, the best approach to take in teaching listening is to offer "real world" listening. Real world listening aims to expose students to a wide variety of authentic speech—from overhearing various types of dialogues to listening to stories. A real world listening approach tries to cultivate listening strategies such as listening for topic, listening for intentions, listening for details, and listening for narrative line. Offering students a diverse curriculum of authentic speech, preferably unscripted and unrehearsed, helps break down the common formulaic approach they take to language, and gives them a base that can allow them to begin functioning within English as a self-referential system.

The first step for the teacher, whether in the classroom or in the language laboratory, is to use English students actually hear—or might hear—in school and in the outside world, and to have them respond to it. Classroom discourse is an obvious place to begin. The teacher can immediately introduce the students to listening by using classroom directions and announcements which require recognition and response. If, for instance, an in-class announcement concerns a room change or a homework assignment, students have to verify the information and record it in their daily schedules or notebooks. The next step is the use of communication beyond the classroom which may have special relevance for the students—such as for a group of classmates who plan to travel abroad during vacation and will need to pay special attention to airport announcements. In-class activities in the form of announcements that simulate a switch in departure time or boarding gate for a flight for which the students are waiting can provide authentic models

of speech which the students have a real incentive to pay attention to. In response to the "announcement," they can check mock boarding passes and make note of the change. Both of these examples make use of setting and information which can be important to the students' immediate lives. However, since the EFL setting in Japan provides only a limited number of opportunities for the students to be directly exposed to authentic speech, even the most resourceful listening teach needs to broaden class exercises to also include speech than may or may not be immediately encountered by the students.

On such activity that I employ at the earliest stages of my listening-speaking course involves listening to a casual conversation between strangers. I often use a taped extract from the text Crosstalk Two entitled, "Starting a Conversation." This short but explicit dialogue neatly illustrates how two people approach one another and start conversing (and listening) purposefully and actively. A man and a woman are on a ferry going from England to the continent. The conversation begins :

Man : Windy, isn't it? (a contextual opener)

Woman : Yes, it is. (simple response)

Man : Uh, where are you going? (more direct personal opener)

Woman : To Germany. I'm going home. (response with added information)

Man : Oh, you're German. (guess based on her response)

Later, as the two get to know each other better, they continue,

Man : What do YOU (emphasis) do? (the woman already knows what the man does)

Woman : I'm a student...

Man : What are you studying? (related, follow-up question)

Woman : Medicine. (abreviated response)

Man : Oh, my brother's a doctor. (he attempts to make a connention)

What these two people do in their brief encounter is much more than simply exchange personal information or interview one another. They ask questions and make statements in a very natural give and take, drawing upon what was said previously. They repeat, confirm, and show feeling for what the other says, make guesses about each other, and try to connect with one another by looking for openings to establish shared interests and experiences.

This extract can also be used to introduce students to other necessary listening skills, such as recognizing how speakers omit words from questions and statements and the importance of repetition in clarifying received messages. By having students do a follow-up listening-speaking activity where they (in pairs) create a similar dialogue of their own, the teacher can "ground" this listening exercise with the intention of making the students able to have a similar conversation with someone they meet for the first time. This added lever gives students a reason to listen beyond simply recalling farts about two people they neither know nor will ever meet.

Another listening activity that orients students to real world listening and which helps them listen for much more than just recall is a conversation between two people who already know each other. Such conversations can be found in most EFL texts. I often use one from Spectrum Two, "Let's Celebrate." The conversation begins with greetings, small talk, and reference to the previous encounter between two people : it continues with the expression of speaker intentions—asking a favor, empathizing, and thanking—and then a third person joins the conversation. the exchange concludes with one person suggesting that they all celebrate the recent good luck of two of the people. Preparing the students for this activity is important. Before playing the conversation, I have in my own mind a very personal reason to talk to others in class about celebrating something of relevance, such as a senior getting a good job offer, or the recent victory of the university baseball team over its rival.

Preparation for this activity also includes asking students to expect to hear certain vocabulary and structures that may come up in a conversation focusing on celebrating. I often use an example in which someone I know has just gotten promoted or won a contest. I engage a student in conversation and mention the person I am referring to. The exchange goes something like this :

Me : By the way, did I tell you about my brother-in-law?

Student : No, what happened? /Who?

Me : He just got a new job and he's going to make more money. /You know, my sister's husband who is. . . .

Student : That's great. (or some such congratulatory response)

The conversation will continue and I will entreat the student to tell me some good news about one of his or her good friends or family, so that I can reciprocate with congratulations. During our conversation—which is "live" listening input for other class members—I help the student keep the conversation going by echoing possible responses to what I say, or by giving the student "new" vocabulary he or she can use to restate or paraphrase something I have said. Our conversation will closely parallel the exchange students will later hear on tape. If necessary, I repeat the conversation with another student—perhaps with more than one. At this time, I also sometimes ask students to make note of new vocabulary and expressions they have just heard, and to listen for these on the tape. After students have listened to the taped exchange, they compare (in pairs) what they have heard with what they expected to hear—for example, whether certain vocabulary was used, or whether they heard particular intentions expressed.

A third type of important listening activity involves conversation that is more than a sequence of greetings and small talk (e. g. goes beyond the brief conversations in which we ask for help, offer advice, apologize) —in other words, a discussion. A listening activity that focuses students'attention on how a daily exchange can evolve into a discussion (or the telling of a story) can take students beyond the rudiments of "eavesdropping" on someone else's conversation. In the text, Listening In and Speaking Out, for example, students hear four people engaged in a variety of lively and entertaining discussions. Often these discussions have begun with the reporting of an incident of with one person complaining to another about a recent experience. In this more sophisticated listening training, students listen for the point at which the casual conversation becomes a discussion, and what prompts one or more of the speakers to initiate the discussion. Students learn to determine the speakers'opinions and how speakers support generalizations they make, as well as for ways in which one speaker agrees or disagrees with another.

Whether listening to a conversation between strangers, a conversation between people who know each other, or a discussion that has evolved from a casual everyday conversation, students need to be encouraged to listen *for their own reasons*. Obviously, if a student is interested in music, and has extensive knowledge of the topic, he or she will recognize and understand a conversation or discussion about music better than one, for example, about politics, and have greater *motivation* for listening. Student motivation can also be built by allowing the class to help you choose listening materials, and even allowing students to decide how they will listen to these materials. Instead of having them answer "your" comprehension questions, let them sometimes compose their own. Instead of requiring them to fill in blanks of the textbook's speech input exercise, allow them to see a transcript of the input and make their own blanks. Later on, they can vie with each other in groups to successfully complete their own selfdesigned exercises.

Listening for specific purposes also deserves mention, such as listening with the aim of recognizing what two or more speakers have in common, or how they express or hide their feelings or intentions. For many types of listening activities students can be asked to listen to empathize with speakers, or to react to what they say. Listening texts usually feature exercises to learn new vocabulary related to particular topics, particular settings, and between particular people. However, with the teacher lies the responsibility of offering students a variety of reasons for *why* they should listen to what others say, as well as the basis for how people speak in different situations.

Aside from listening to the radio or to announcements at a train station, in the real world people seldom hear speech without the benefit of non-verbal cues. To teach students how strangers approach one another and begin conversing, or how people interview others formally or informally, video can be an invaluable tool. A number of videos designed especially for EFL teaching are available, but other resources are good to use as well, such as taped material from television, or selections from the In America series. A single In Amereca segment, for instance, very nicely illustrates how a person informally talks about himself

or herself, and can help students do the same in a more natural, less mechanical fashion.

When I use television-taped material in class or in the language laboratory, I often play the audio portion of the tape without using the visual screen at first so that students can imagine the situation and setting, who is talking to whom, what is being talked about, what those speaking want of each other, and so forth. Students are asked to jot down a few words or expressions they already know, as well as a couple of words or expressions they think they recognize, but do not understand. Repeated listening—without watching—forces the students to focus on certain non-visual cues such as shifts in tone of voice or topic. Theh listen for questions that are asked and answered. They try to catch what kinds of intentions are expressed, and how those are expressed. In pairs or small groups, I then have students compare along these specified lines their impressions of what they have heard.

Only after stydents have some idea of what is actually taking place—casual conversation, discussion, interview, story-telling—do I run the video on the screen so that they can confirm what they have already listened to. Actually seeing the speaker (s) further assists them in listening for intentions, intonation, turn-taking tactics, and in seeing how people approach each other in different settings and for different reasons.

Listening to stories is yet another real world listening activity, especially if there is some opportunity for students to interact with the story-teller (e. g. participatory listening). Here the aim is to listen not only to how the speaker structures the telling of the story, but also how the listeners themselves confirm what they hear by interrupting to check understanding, and by asking questions. This presents a challenge beyond simply recalling what happened, where, and to whom.

When choosing texts and taped materials for your listening class, it is important that you know what kind of listening behavior and habits you want your students to develop. You will also want to have a variety of exercises and activities that meet their more immediate listening needs. Any text or tape that helps students recognize your speech, for example, you can use with confidence. Materials that help them hear spoken language on which they can realistically and immediately base their own speaking efforts—for example, engaging in lively conversations with strangers, telling interesting personal stories, or giving directions and instructions requested by others—will be material that you will want to consider. In recent years, ELT publishers have come out with a wide variety of texts solely devoted to listening : you will want to spend ample time in a bookstore reviewing these course books to determine which one best suits your students' needs. Finally, don't forget that in the classroom, no one is more real as an input source than the teacher. Take an interest in the students and cultivate reasons to talk to them : this will show them that they have reason to listen to you.

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