

An Empirical Study of the Factors Contributing to Japanese Junior High School Students' Listening Ability in English

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The aim of the present paper is to ascertain the relationship between the listening skill and the other language (sub) skills of Japanese EFL learners at the junior high school level. The study of listening skill in second/ foreign language learning has traditionally focused on the roles of individual linguistic units, e.g. phonemes, words, grammatical structures and in the belief that the development of those elements would eventually lead to the enhancement of the overall listening skill, teaching listening comprehension has been considered the training of these linguistic units. Recently, however, the roles of the listener's background world knowledge, expectations, the situation and context have been brought to the attention of Second/ Foreign Language (SL/FL hereafter) research and it was found that a lack of subordinate skills can be compensated by the learner's world knowledge. In other words, greater importance has been attached to the multiple perspectives in building up the listening ability.

However, behind these single skill acquisition studies, little attention has been paid to a multiple relationship between different language skills; for instance, between listening and speaking. How is the development of listening skill related to other language skills such as speaking or reading? Furthermore, most SL/FL studies are targeted to adolescent or adult SL/FL learners; in contrast, very few studies of this kind have been carried out in the initial stage of SL/FL learning, that is, at the junior high school level. Therefore, using a statistical procedure, the present authors tried to identify some variables, language skills and linguistic factors, which are more likely to influence the development of listening skill at an early stage of SL/FL learning.

Key words: Listening, Multiple Regression Analysis

1. Introduction

In traditional approaches to SL/FL teaching, the importance of teaching listening has been undervalued. However, more recent approaches seem to emphasize the role of listening in oral communication and even more so in the recent communicative trend in SL/FL teaching. In Communicative Approach, in addition to the linguistic factors at the phonetic/ phonological, morphological/ syntactic, semantic levels, which are based on the structural approach to language, more and more attention has been given to the contextual, situational, and

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sociocultural aspects of the listening skill. Furthermore, there seems to be a growing trend from discrete-point approach to integrative approach to the teaching of listening. How are these linguistic factors related with each other in developing the listening skill? How closely are other language skills, such as reading, related to the development of the listening skill? The present paper aims to review the nature of the listening skill and investigate the relationship between the listening skill and other language skills.

2. Background

Prior to the inquiry into the relationship between listening ability and other related language abilities/linguistic factors, we need to define the fundamental nature of the listening ability. There have been some different viewpoints on the way language proficiency can be divided. According to Oller & Finofotis (1980), there are at least the following two hypotheses:

i) Divisible competence hypothesis

Language proficiency can be divided into separate components and separate skills or aspects of them. The components usually singled out include phonology, syntax, and lexicon and the skills listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

ii) Unitary competence hypothesis (indivisibility hypothesis)

The components of language competence, whatever they may be, may function more or less similarly in any language-based task.

Here we could assume a mid-position between the two hypotheses, that is, partial divisibility hypothesis, which admits both unique and common features of language competence (Oller & Finofotis, 1980; Yoshida, 1984, p.28). Here we would like to take the third stance, that is, partial divisibility hypothesis, and to look into the relationship between the component factors.

3. Components of listening ability

What do EFL/ESL learners do when they are engaged in listening comprehension? In his seminal article on numerous theoretical and practical issues in teaching listening comprehension, Richards (1983) gave a comprehensive taxonomy of the listening skill. His list of microskills in listening covers a whole domain of listening comprehension that is useful not only in teaching but also in evaluating listening abilities. Brown (1994), adapting from Richards (1983) and other sources, summarizes microskills of listening comprehension as in the following checklist:

- 1) Retain chunks of language of different lengths in short-term memory.
- 2) Discriminate among the distinctive sounds of English.
- 3) Recognize English stress patterns, words in stressed and unstressed positions, rhythmic structure, intonational contours, and their role in signaling information.
- 4) Recognizing reduced forms of words.
- 5) Distinguish word boundaries, recognize a core of words, and interpret word order patterns and their significance.
- 6) Process speech at different rates of delivery.
- 7) Process speech containing pauses, errors, corrections, and other performance variables.
- 8) Recognize grammatical word classes (nouns, verbs, etc.), systems (e.g., tense, agreement, pluralization), patterns, rules, and elliptical forms.
- 9) Detect sentence constituents and distinguish between major and minor constituents.
- 10) Recognize that a particular meaning may be expressed in different grammatical forms.
- 11) Recognize cohesive devices in spoken discourse.
- 12) Recognize the communicative functions of utterances, according to situations, participants, goals.

- 13) Infer situations, participants, goals using real world knowledge.
- 14) From events, ideas, etc., described, predict outcomes, infer links and connections between events, deduce causes and effects, and detect such relations as main idea, supporting idea, new information, given information, generalization, and exemplification.
- 15) Distinguish between literal and implied meanings.
- 16) Use facial, kinesic, "body language," and other nonverbal clues to decipher meanings.
- 17) Develop and use a battery of listening strategies, such as detecting key words, guessing the meaning of words from context, appeal for help, and signaling comprehension or lack thereof.

As he notes, these 17 microskills apply to conversational discourse; listening to monologue, such as academic lectures, will require more specific microskills (identifying the structure of a lecture, weeding out what may be irrelevant or tangential, and so on).

Among the list above, some microskills are more or less specific to listening ability (such as Item 2: Discrimination of sounds) whereas some are applicable to other skills as well (such as Item 8: Recognition of grammatical systems). If you adopt the stance of interactive model of listening comprehension, listening is not a single, unidirectional process; it is naturally intertwined with other components of linguistic features (pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary) and other language skills (speaking, reading and writing). Here we can easily guess that these linguistic features and other language skills are of some relevance to listening ability. However, there are few empirical evidences reported about the relative intensity among these relationships; for example, is grammatical knowledge more relevant to listening ability rather than pronunciation ability? Furthermore, little attention seems to have been paid to the factors contributing to the development of listening skills of the learners at elementary or early intermediate level. Therefore, the following two research questions were addressed in this article.

- i) Which linguistic feature is more relevant to listening ability among pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary?
For instance, is the learner with high grammatical competence guaranteed to be a good listener of English?
- ii) Which language skill is more relevant to listening ability, reading or writing?

4. The Study

The purpose of this study is to identify the linguistic features and language skills which are most likely to contribute to explaining the listening ability of Japanese learners of English at the junior high school level.

(1) Participants

80 third-year junior high school students (14-15 years old; 40 boys and 40 girls) at a junior high school participated in this study. They have four 50-minute English classes a week and have been studying English for two and a half years. As is always the case in EFL contexts, input in English, especially oral input, is extremely limited, so we can say that all the students are exposed to a similar amount of input in English. Although a large group of them have extra exposure to English in cram schools outside the regular course, the oral input there can be negligible.

(2) Method

All the participants took an English test, which was composed of six sections: listening, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, reading, and writing. The total mark of the test is 100 and the breakdown of each section is as follows:

Part 1	Listening	(30)
	Easy comprehension	(10)
	Moderate	(10)
	Difficult	(10)

Part 2	Vocabulary (14)	
	Translation (Japanese to English)	(4)
	Translation (English to Japanese)	(4)
	Phrasal verbs & idioms	(6)
Part 3	Grammar (14)	
	Word order	(2)
	Sentence structure	(4)
	Translation (Japanese to English)	(4)
	Translation (English to Japanese)	(4)
Part 4	Pronunciation (14)	
	Vowels	(2)
	Word stress	(10)
	Sentence stress	(2)
Part 5	Reading (14)	
	Reading comprehension	(14)
Part 6	Composition (14)	
	Controlled composition	(6)
	Free composition	(8)
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Total		100

Naturally, test-taking speed differs from learner to learner. They were given 50 minutes (including 15 minutes for the listening comprehension section) to finish the test, but there is a chance that some learners cannot answer the test items placed in the end because of the shortage of time although they would be able to finish them if they had more time. To avoid this, a time limit was set for each section so that they could at least partially answer all the sections.

(3) Results

The total scores and the mean scores of each section are as follows:

Table 1. The Total and Mean Scores of Correct Answers

Part	Category	Full	Mean (%)
1	Listening	30	17.1 (57%)
2	Vocabulary	14	5.6 (40%)
3	Grammar	14	3.2 (23%)
4	Pronunciation	14	9.7 (69%)
5	Reading	14	7.3 (52%)
6	Composition	14	6.5 (46%)
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Total		100	49.2

The highest score of this group is 89; the lowest, 8. As is clear from the percentage of correct answers, the subjects marked the highest scores in the listening section; furthermore, among the three sub-sections of the listening test, the students got higher scores in picture tests whereas they got lower marks in dictation and listening comprehension sections. In grammar test, they got the lowest scores and some of them could not finish the test items within the time limit.

(4) Analysis

After all the test results were collected, the data was computed with multiple regression analysis. In order to identify the factor(s) which will most effectively explain about the relationship between listening ability and other skills, we set the listening comprehension score as Dependent variable, and Vocabulary, Grammar, Pronunciation, Reading, Composition scores as Independent variables. The results of the analysis are as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Coefficients

Model Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients		Std Coefficients	<i>t</i>	Significance of <i>t</i>
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Reading	.486	.157	.307	3.088	.003
Grammar	.515	.207	.257	2.485	.015
Composition	.201	.119	.181	1.693	.095
Pronunciation	.227	.198	.117	1.147	.255
Vocabulary	.178	.210	.092	.847	.400

This result indicates that, among the factors composing of listening comprehension ability and related skills, the reading test score has the highest explanatory power ($\beta = .307$) followed by the Grammar test score ($\beta = .257$). On the other hand, vocabulary, pronunciation, and English composition test scores do not seem to have a strong relationship with listening comprehension ability.

(5) Discussion

This analysis can prove the strength of the relationship between listening skill and other skills. The present result is somehow as anticipated. First, grammar seems to be a strong predictor of listening ability. Probably this relationship can be explained in terms of the way English is taught in the junior high school classroom in Japan. Grammar plays a dominant role in the English language classroom based on synthetic syllabus, and textbooks are also compiled upon the principle of grammatical syllabus. So, naturally, grammatical competence can play a key role in developing the listening ability.

Secondly, reading comprehension ability seems to be most likely to explain the level of listening comprehension; that is, the relevance between the listening comprehension ability and the reading comprehension ability is stronger than any other relation as the result shows. This can be discussed from several viewpoints. The result may show the way English is taught in the classroom. Although most texts in the textbooks are made up of dialogues these days, they are often dealt with as reading materials through the activities such as comprehension check or English-to-Japanese translation. Most importantly, though, reading and listening seem to have a lot in common as the summary on the components of listening ability by H. Brown shown above.

Finally, we were not able to recognize the relevance of pronunciation and vocabulary to the listening ability for learners at the initial stage of SL/FL learning. As Table 2 indicates, both factors were excluded as predictor variables. Part of the reason might be that their vocabulary size is too small to make a difference as a whole. Also, the pronunciation test consisted of paper-and-pencil type of items which test the knowledge, not performance, of stress at the word/ sentence level; therefore, they might not necessarily test the pronunciation ability of the learners. Further improvement of test items will be necessary to achieve more reliable results in explaining the factors contributing to the listening ability of the learners.

Conclusion

The present study identified reading comprehension and grammar as the two possible key components contributing to the development of the listening skill. One thing we should be careful in interpreting the present result is, however, that these inter-skill relationship is not a causal one; in other words, we cannot guarantee that the teaching of reading can lead to the development of the listening ability. Furthermore, we limited our scope of analysis to the overall relationship between the listening ability and other skills this time. A series of researches into language learning strategies have uncovered a number of micro-skills/ strategies that will contribute to the development of reading and listening. It remains the subject of future research to articulate how the factors contributing to the listening skill develop or change over time in the course of SL/FL acquisition.

Notes

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