Research Note

Towards a Process Approach: Introducing Decoding Activities to a Low-Level Listening Course

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This article is a response to Field's (2008) call for listening syllabus designers and teachers to pay more attention to the processes of successful listening in the second language classroom. Revisions made to a low-level English listening course for Japanese university students are discussed. First, the problems faced by Japanese students in a listening EFL classroom are described, including a brief comparison of the phonology of Japanese and English, and a short critique of existing methodologies in the listening classroom. Next, a series of micro-listening activities introduced to the listening course are outlined, including the rationale for selecting them. Finally, plans to introduce diagnostic activities into the listening syllabus are explained, including the creation of a bank of short decoding activities.

Key Words : Listening, Decoding, Materials Design

The Challenge of Listening for Japanese EFL Students

Whilst many Japanese students enter university able to read many high frequency English words, they often fail to recognize these same words when they hear them (Graham-Marr, 2015). One explanation for this is that listening proficiency is often perceived as something that will develop naturally though exposure alone. Consequently, listening receives little pedagogical attention in English curriculums (Field, 2008). Another explanation is the considerable differences between Japanese and English phonology. English is a stress-timed language with a regular rhythm. Syllables tend to be stressed at regular intervals and, thus, function words are often reduced to allow for this regular pattern. Japanese, on the other hand, is a mora-timed language which means that the time needed to pronounce each mora (shorter than a syllable) is about the same. Graham-Marr (2015, p.8) argues that these differences in the sound systems make it difficult for Japanese learners to comprehend naturally spoken English. Thus, both the lack of attention to listening pedagogy and the significant differences in phonology between English and Japanese have created a situation where Japanese EFL learners struggle to hear high frequency vocabulary.

For low-level learners, this problem is further compounded by the *comprehension* approach to teaching listening. This approach measures success in listening by correct responses to questions or tasks (Field, 1998). Whilst this focus on comprehension does provide learners with listening experience, it does little to train them to become more effective in the processes of listening. Indeed, Brown (1986) has argued that without developing diagnostic procedures, the listening teacher is only able to test comprehension and not teach it.

Some prominent researchers (Brown, 1986; Field, 2008; Graham-Marr, 2015) argue that listening is a skill that needs to be 'taught' and that syllabus designers need to develop a systematic approach to teaching listening skills. This is particularly the case in Japan due to the differences in phonology between Japanese and English.

Introducing a Process Approach to Listening

The focus of this article is the listening syllabus for first-year low-level students at a private university in Japan. Considering the problems outlined above, new lesson activities were introduced with the intention of promoting more teaching of listening skills. These activities were based around the ideas of Field

(2008) who advocates a *process* approach to teaching listening. This approach is based on processes that have been shown to lead to successful L1 listening. Field argues that these same processes should be taught to L2 learners, and proposes that listening can be divided into several components that can be practiced intensively by L2 learners. Thus, by identifying and teaching a set of sub-skills that have been demonstrated through research to lead to successful L1 listening, the process approach gives L2 learners a higher chance of successful listening through training in these same sub-skills.

Furthermore, Field argues that less experienced listeners depend upon processing speech at word level. These learners form a hypothesis based on the limited number of words they can identify in the speech steam (Field, 2008, p. 118). Rather than concentrate on general comprehension, this suggests that low-level learners need training at the word level. This was taken as a starting point for designing materials to be introduced into the English program.

One major component of the listening process is decoding. This involves translating the speech stream into sounds, words, clauses and ultimately into a literal meaning. A serious problem for L2 learners is that words can vary considerably in connected speech. Thus, when matching phonemes to a model of how a word sounds in isolation, they must allow for these differences. Field (2008) suggests that teaching decoding skills is "...the most effective means of improving a novice learner's performance" (p. 140). By training learners to recognize and allow for variations in pronunciation they will be able to decode more words in the speech stream and be more confident about matching words they hear to their meanings. Field claims that many of these variations are systematic and can be divided into four main groups:

- phonological rules which connect words together in connected speech and change syllable sounds (e.g. took his hat off → tookhis hatoff);
- alternative weak forms for function words (e.g. a →/ə/);
- speakers taking short-cuts to articulate sounds more easily (e.g. green paint → greem paint):
- reducing words when they occur in a larger group (e.g. actually → /æʃli/)

(Field, 2008, p. 143)

A series of activities were developed which focus on decoding short samples of connected speech. The purpose of these activities is to increase the speed and accuracy of the learners' decoding skills, which should boost confidence and be more effective than simply listening to extended passages of text and answering comprehension questions. However, there were limitations in terms of what could be introduced into the existing listening course. Firstly, there was limited time available to develop the materials and secondly, the course was spread over just twelve lessons so it was not possible to systematically cover all the four groups identified by Field (2008). Consequently, three groups of pronunciation variation (function words, linking and elision) were targeted and the following activities were created.

1. Decoding Function Words

Function words such as *a, the* and *she* are all high frequency words. However, when used in connected speech a weak form is often used. These weak forms are much more difficult for the listener to decode. It is sometimes argued that learners can often understand a sentence without needing to hear the function words. However, in addition to their high frequency, there are instances where failure to decode function words correctly can lead to misunderstanding. For instance, compare the difference between *I'm looking* for *the paintings* and *I'm looking* at *the paintings*. Therefore, helping low-level learners recognize function words seems to be class time well-spent.

One simple way to do this is through short dictation activities. The following activity is an example how function words were introduced to the listening course.

Table 1.

Activity 1: Function Words
Listen and fill in the blanks in the sentences below:

1. It's at the top of _____ building. (the)
2. I'm waiting at _____ bus stop. (a)
3. I _____ like to try it. (would)
4. He _____ _____ like to work in a bank. (wouldn't)
5. It was _____ rainy day. (a)
6. One of _____ benefits is lower cost. (the)
7. She _____ _____ go back to New York. (would not)
8. _____ you agree with that? (Do)
9. He looked at _____ photograph. (the)

This type of activity is easy to recycle later in the course and it is also possible to identify which words are causing decoding problems and target these in future lessons and assessment.

2. Linking

Transitioning between words in rapid speech is a complex process and speakers often take short cuts. This often results in word boundaries linking together and becoming less distinct. Because some of these transitions are systematic and to some extent predictable, it is useful for learners to be aware of where linking is likely to occur and how the sounds are likely to change. Three types of linking activity that were introduced to the course are outlined below.

2.1 Consonant-Vowel Linking

The first type of linking activity introduces learners to consonant-vowel linking. When a word ending in a consonant is followed by a word beginning in a consonant linking occurs to enable a smooth transition from one sound to the next. For example, 'is a' becomes /ɪze/. This type of linking is prevalent in English as shown in the following example;

"By Russian standards Tashtagol **is a** tiny little town - just twenty-thousand people, a few street**s an**d **a** handfu**l o**f roads. So you may be surprised to learn that traffic problems here have been causing chaos - not because of cars but becau**se o**f cows."

("Pronunciation tips", 2005)

This type of linking is very common when linking to weak forms of function words. Again, a simple dictation exercise was used to help students understand this type of linking.

Table 2

Activity 2: Consonant-vowel linking

1. Listen again and fill in the missing words. There can be more than one word in each gap.

a) Please _____ the lights. (switch off)

b) Two _____. (fried eggs)

c) He is tired _____ work. (because of)

d) A _____ town. (tiny little)

e) _____ moment. (Just a)

2. Read the following sentences. Which words do you think will be linked? Underline them.

a) When do you get up?

b) I'm sure he can fix it.

c) I bought it yesterday afternoon.

d) I have an appointment.

2.2 Vowel-Vowel Linking

The second linking activity introduced focuses on *vowel-vowel* linking. This type of sound change occurs when a speaker transitions from one word ending in a vowel to another word starting with a vowel sound. To enable to a smooth transition an extra sound (/w/ or /j/) is added. To illustrate this to learners the following dictation activity was incorporated into the materials.

Table 3

Activity 3: Vowel-vowel linking

1. Listen to the following short sentences and write down what you hear.

a) (go/w/up)

b) (do/w/a challenge)

c) (the/j/elevator)

d) (I/j/agree)

2. Look at the table below and write the sounds changes in the column on the right.

Careful speech	Regular speech (add /w/ or /j/)
go up	go/w/up
see it	
the end	
too often	
lie on	
no entry	
pay all	

2.3 Consonant-Consonant Linking

The third type of linking activity created focuses on consonant-consonant linking where the consonant sounds between words are the same. For example, 'more rice' changes to 'morice' (/mɔːaɪs/) in rapid speech. This occurs because the tongue is already in the correct position to pronounce /r/, so the sound is only released when the speaker says the next word. Thus, the final consonant sound of the first word is unheard. This is also demonstrated though a diction activity shown below.

Table 4

Activity 4: Consonant-consonant linking

a) Listen to the sentences and write down what you hear.

1. (I'm a bit tired)
2. (We have a lot to do.)
3. (Tell me what to say.)
4. (Do you want more rice?)
5. (When is the big game?)

b) Look at the following sentences. Underline where you think consonant to consonant linking will occur.

1. The gas station is by the supermarket.
2. The park is open all year round.
3. I think the hard drive is broken.
4. I want to work in the service sector.
5. She has a lot of friends.

These three types of linking: consonant-vowel; vowel-vowel, and consonant-consonant are extremely

frequent in spoken English, but are also common causes of communication breakdown for L2 listeners. By helping learners to understand why and when these types of linking are likely to occur this should help to decode a higher number of words in the speech stream, and gain confidence in making well-founded hypothesis about what they hear.

3. Elision

Another frequent cause of decoding problems is elision. In rapid speech /t/ and /d/ sounds at the ends of words often disappear. In fact, Brown (1990, as cited in Field, 2008) concludes from her study of spoken English that /t/ and /d/ are more commonly elided than pronounced when they occur between consonants. This is a significant problem for learners because these sounds often occur in the contracted forms of auxiliary verbs (e.g. hasn't) and are also used to inflect words (e.g. called, kept). It is unlikely that learners will be able to decode these missing sounds though listening practice alone, and this is a process that teachers need to raise awareness of.

As with linking, it is relatively simple to design a series of dictation activities to improve learner's awareness of elision. In particular, elision of /t/ and /d/ was focused on since these sounds are frequently elided and are often central to understand the grammar of the sentence. An example dictation activity is shown below.

Table 5

Activity 5: Elision

a) Listen to the words and write down what you hear.

1. (costs)
2. (facts)
3. (friends)
4. (finds)
5. (clothes)
6. (handbag)

b) Now listen to the following sentences and write down what you hear.

1. (I'm going next week)
2. (This is the worst job in the world)
3. (It isn't very big.)
4. (She hasn't finished yet)
5. (It doesn't work.)

As with the previous activities, students are gradually made aware of inconsistencies in the speech stream and this helps them to be more flexible in matching known words to the words that they hear.

In short, a series of short dictation activities have been introduced into the listening syllabus focusing on five areas of decoding including weak forms of function words, linking and elision. Whilst these are important features of spoken English that low-level learners need assistance with, there are clearly many other areas of listening that demand attention in the classroom.

Towards a Diagnostic Approach

An important question for a listening teacher is how did a student successfully or unsuccessfully decode a sequence of speech. In the case of multiple choice questions, leaners may have been using strategic guessing to compensate for their poor decoding skills. Even when students arrive at the correct answer, there is no way for the teacher to know if this is because of accurate listening skills, or simply through use of context and/or guessing. This is one of the fundamental problems with the comprehension approach; the focus is on the product, not the process (Field, 2008, p.81). The decoding activities outlined above should help learners to automatize the decoding process, but they are prescriptive in assuming that all leaners have the same strengths and weaknesses. These activities might not help classes or students who have a weakness in one area not covered in the syllabus. A more effective way of helping these students would be to develop a bank of activities that can be called upon as and when decoding problems are identified in the classroom. For example, if a teacher notices that students are experiencing decoding problems with elision of the /t/ in "isn't", this would be a good opportunity to introduce elision in "hasn't" and "doesn't". Thus, the classroom teacher would be better equipped to raise awareness of speech variation as it arises.

The challenge of creating a bank of decoding activities is that it will take a long time to build up and to keep organized so that teachers can access the appropriate activity rapidly in the classroom. This is a long-term project currently under development. Since most students on this course are L1 Japanese speakers with a similar educational background, it is likely that they will experience similar decoding problems. However, this is an area that needs further research to ensure that learners are getting support where it is most needed. Developing and making an extensive bank of decoding practice activities should empower teachers to not only find mistakes in comprehension questions, but to address problems in the listening process directly.

Another aspect of the diagnostic approach is to encourage students to notice gaps in their decoding skills autonomously. This can be facilitated using listening transcripts. Transcripts are often neglected as a teaching resource, but can be invaluable in assisting learners to identify why they had listening difficulties. Following a series of listening tasks, learners can read and listen to the transcript at the same time to identify words or sounds that they unable to hear through just listening. The effectiveness of this activity can be improved if learners are told to categorize their decoding problems into groups, such as vocabulary, grammar, linking, and elision. This information can also be a valuable resource for teachers to identify which listening processes students are and are not having problems with and feeding back this information into future lesson planning.

In short, two resources can be exploited to make listening teachnig move diagnostic; a bank of decoding activities and using listening transcripts. This will move lessons from being mostly prescriptive and rigid into a more flexible and responsive style of class. Teachers will be better equipped to deal with listening problems as they arise, and students will become more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in the listening process.

Conclusion

This article has outlined changes made to a low-level listening syllabus for EFL learners in Japan. These changes were made following suggestions by Field (2008) and his argument that current listening teaching focusses too much on the product of listening and not on the process. A series of micro-listening activities have been developed to improve listeners decoding skills. These include listening to function words, linking and elision. Additionally, a bank of micro-listening activities is being created to give teachers added resources to diagnose and respond to listening problems as they occur. These measures are designed to help learners achieve higher levels of automaticity in their decoding skills, which skilled L1 listeners take for granted.

The current syllabus is a step in the right direction, but there is much to be done before the course can be considered a process approach to listening. More classroom research needs to be done to identify which listening processes need to be prioritized in the syllabus and to assess the effectiveness of the changes that have been implemented.

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