

# Listening Comprehension and Acquisition in Skill-based Course Design

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Current SLA theory suggests listening course design that combines comprehension exercises (top-down) and acquisition exercises (bottom-up), with a focus on noticing, restructuring, and stretching. A listening course was constructed to incorporate this theory into a two-week-per-single-videotext system (with one of the weeks getting the comprehension focus and the second week getting the acquisition focus), over a 14-week semester, using the theme of technology. The course was part two of a three part series of listening courses in the English Language Program at the School of Policy Studies in Kwansei Gakuin University. Student feedback (n = 502) was taken in the form of a 34-item, 4-point Likert-type questionnaire, with two qualitative questions following. Feedback items relating to the incorporation of tasks within current theory received positive feedback. Positive feedback was also received by teachers and was accompanied by several ideas to improve the current course. Of greatest interest was the idea to increase the focus on bottom-up style exercises in the current course at an earlier point for the purpose of student confidence, which slightly contradicts current theory.

**Key Words :** Listening Text, Noticing, Restructuring, Stretching, Course Design

## Introduction

Current second language acquisition (SLA) theory recommends a two-part system for constructing listening courses in order to make both bottom-up and top-down materials available.

The first part, *comprehension*, works to allow listeners 'to recognize and act on the general, specific, or implied meaning of utterances' (Richards, 2006). Parts of the language used by speakers, like syntax or idioms, are simply carriers of meaning. Once meaning has been ascertained – after the meaning of the utterance has been acquired – those parts of the language used merely to transport the meaning are no longer needed, so they are discarded. Materials used in the classroom for comprehension, then, should include top-down activities that help learners focus on meaning, like predicting exercises, summarizing, and learning listening strategies; materials that work on learners' abilities to glean meaning, while allowing learners to discard the

carriers by not making them a focus.

The second part, *acquisition*, works to allow the learner 'to incorporate new linguistic items into his or her language repertoire' (Richards, 2006). This takes place in three stages, 1) *noticing*, 2) *restructuring*, and 3) *stretching*. *Noticing*, according to Schmidt (1990), is the necessity of noticing something about input before learning from it. In other words, we might say that one must first notice the curry shop on the corner before going in for the lunch set. The second stage, *restructuring*, according to Van Patten, refers to

...those [processes] that mediate the incorporation of intake into the developing system. Since the internalization of intake is not mere accumulation of discrete bits of data, data have to 'fit in' in some way and sometimes the accommodation of a particular set of data causes changes in the rest of the system (1993).

To continue the analogy, if we like the curry at the shop on the corner, we may make the shop a regular stop, hence changing our routine. We may, however, get food poisoning and avoid even the area around the shop because of the horrible memory, hence changing our routine. Regardless of the degree or type of effect, the curry shop on the corner has had an effect. It's a part of our history to a degree, part of our memory, and must 'fit in' with the other memories and causing a restructuring. Finally, *stretching* occurs '...where the learner needs to produce output which the current interlanguage system cannot handle...[which]...pushes the limits of the interlanguage system to handle that output' (Tarone and Liu, 1995). In other words, growth of ability requires experimentation with newly noticed language in order for the newly noticed language to become a part of a learner's ability, and activities should be designed to allow for this sort of experimentation. There must be a way for learners to move information from a decontextualized place to a contextualized place in their repertoire. The materials used in the classroom for acquisition, then, should be activities that help learners focus on awareness of the language, for example noticing the difference in the order of something they hear and a printed version of it, cloze exercises, and completing sentence stems based on a listening text. Materials should then continue by stretching learners, by, finally, including activities that ask learners to use key language from the recent text in their own ways such as in role-play activities or in written assignments based on the texts.

With these two systems in mind, a cycle of noticing activities and restructuring activities were highlighted in the following course, with comprehension as a general feature begun in the pre-listening segment. The course was then implemented into the curriculum of the English Language Program (ELP) at the School of Policy Studies at Kwansei Gakuin University. Finally, it was evaluated by students using a four-point, Likert-like scale, and by teachers using an open-ended questionnaire and an open-forum meeting.

### Mapping the Course

The following rubric was used for constructing the course map; it's a general rubric the author uses to implement courses into pre-existing programs.

#### Part 1 Time

- How many classes per week?
- How many hours per class?
- How many *total hours in the course*?

- Subtract the total time for the first and last classes from the *total hours in the course*.
- The answer is *net total hours*.

#### Part 2 Tasks

- How many specific tasks do you want to complete? This answer should be at least two short of *net total hours* to allow leeway for individual classes and 'workshop' time. In other words, if *net total hours* are 15, there should be from 10 to 12 total tasks.

#### Part 3 Embedding

- Connect at least half of total tasks to other classes within the same program; classes that students have taken, will take, or are taking now. This will insure that students get adequate review and get a circulation of concepts (e.g., vocabulary) within the program.
- Other tasks should be specific tasks related to the topic of the class. If the class is focused on speaking, one day's task might focus on conversation gambits for example. If the class has a listening focus, one task might have a focus on note taking skills.
- There should be no more than two of the same type of task in the course and these should be spread apart enough for students to be re-challenged by the actual task.

### Overview of EC2 Listening

EC2 Listening is a continuation of EC1 Listening (a course where simpler forms of like-activities were introduced) and focuses on improving academic listening skills in English using videotexts. The videotexts were available to watch outside of class prior to these exercises using an online central database. The course is designed in a content-based format with the listening texts focusing on the theme of Technology.

The course implements skill-based tasks (e.g., notetaking) to facilitate language acquisition within the target materials and as boon for general skill development. The text is also an attempt to allow each teacher freedom to add, subtract, manipulate, or ignore portions of it in order to adjust for specific class abilities and teacher idiosyncrasies. It also allows an easing up, if the teacher so wishes, on the students' homework load.

Most videotexts are used over a two-week period (including A and B). A typical lesson for part A follows a pattern of pre-listening, while-listening, and post-listening. Students worked on pre-viewing exercises, as homework and class work, to give background information about the content before

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watching the videotext. This was intended as an initial focus on comprehension, and consisted of a related reading passage or their own internet research on the topic. While-listening activities continued the focus on comprehension (e.g., working with the vocabulary included in both the reading texts and the video texts) but also included noticing activities (e.g., cloze activities). During the second part of the unit (B), the activities moved towards restructuring and stretching activities, with follow-up exercises using the information or themes of the videotexts, such as responding to a related essay question or writing a quiz based on what they had learned from the related unit A.

### Course Management

The 14-week class is made up of an orientation, six (6) two-week units, and a final class. Each two-week unit is divided into a week of previewing & comprehension and a week of post-viewing & language awareness exercises. Teachers were required to post four (4) grades of ten (10) points each from both sides of the division (A & B) for a total of eight (8) grades. The gradable exercises were decided prior to the course and were not open for substitutions. These were denoted by the inclusion of a grading box in the upper right corner of the page (□).

| VID 1     | VID 2     | VID 3     | VID 4     | VID 5       | VID 6       |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| Weeks 2&3 | Weeks 4&5 | Weeks 6&7 | Weeks 8&9 | Weeks 10&11 | Weeks 12&13 |
| 1A        | 2A        | 3A        | 4A        | 5A          | 6A          |
| 1B        | 2B        | 3B        | 4B        | 5B          | 6B          |

Let's say that the instructor wants to grade the assignments from both weeks 2 & 3, units 1A and 1B. That means, of the remaining 10 classes, the instructor needs to grade only 3 of the A classes and 3 of the B classes. At the end of the semester, the instructor's choice of graded classes might have looked like this:

| Weeks 2&3 | Weeks 4&5 | Weeks 6&7 | Weeks 8&9 | Weeks 10&11 | Weeks 12&13 |
|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|
| 1A Graded | 2A Graded | 3A        | 4A Graded | 5A          | 6A Graded   |
| 1B Graded | 2B        | 3B Graded | 4B        | 5B Graded   | 6B Graded   |

**Four of the A classes and four of the B classes graded for a total of eight graded classes from the 12 weeks.**

The 10 points for the eight classes makes a total of 80

points for each student and 80% of the total grade.

Along with the 10 points for the 8 classes that the instructor decides to grade, an additional 2 points are made available in *each* class for participation (except for the orientation, week 1, and the final, week 14). This grade is intended to be something that instructors can use to differentiate the best students from the marginal students. This two points per class grade is to be used for 1) a student's active role in the class (on task or not), 2) their possession of their materials (how can they really participate if they haven't brought their materials to class?), & 3) their possession of an English-English dictionary. Two points per class over 12 classes are rounded at the end of the term to equal out to 20% of the total grade.

Videos were available on the Internet and can be accessed at home (with the necessary software, such as RealPlayer or QuickTime).

### Grading Criteria

|                            |       |
|----------------------------|-------|
| Pre-viewing Exercises      | } 40% |
| Comprehension              |       |
| Post-viewing Exercises     | } 40% |
| Noticing and restructuring |       |
| Participation              | 20%   |

(Along with this text, there is an open folder for teachers to share their own additions with other teachers. If someone creates something that they feel is better than what is contained in this text for optional portions of the lessons, they can share it with the other EC2 Listening teachers so that others may benefit. This must be done prior to the day of the class and *only for exercises that haven't been predetermined as gradable.*)

### Student Evaluation Results

A thirty-six-item form with a four-point Likert-type scale (for items 1 through 34) was used to evaluate student impressions (n = 502) to overall content, course difficulty, instruction, specific course content, and specific skill focus as well as other related variables. Numbers one through ten on the evaluation were for year, course, class, teacher, and time identification, and numbers eleven through twenty-three were general questions given to all of the English Language Program (ELP) classes. These first twenty-three were written in English and Japanese (as appendix). The remaining questions, twenty-four through thirty-six, were specific to the

EC2 Listening course and were written in English only.

The questions relating directly to EC2 Listening were divided into three parts. Part 1 asked students about the importance of the videos to them in order to establish a connection between the materials and the learners.

### Part 1

Please rate the topics of the video segments used for the EC2 Listening class.

|   |
|---|
| <b>1 = Totally unimportant to me</b><br><b>2 = Unimportant to me</b><br><b>3 = Important to me</b><br><b>4 = Very important to me</b> |
|---|

- 24. Unit 1: RFID Chips in School**  
Average 3.08 / Standard Deviation 0.63
- 25. Unit 2: Bright Future**  
Average 3.13 / Standard Deviation 0.60
- 26. Unit 3: Electronics' Dirty Secret**  
Average 3.19 / Standard Deviation 0.59
- 27. Unit 4: Connecting Cambodia**  
Average 3.18 / Standard Deviation 0.66
- 28. Unit 5: Chicago's Big Brother**  
Average 3.21 / Standard Deviation 0.60
- 29. Unit 6: Big Brother: Conspiracies**  
Average 3.10 / Standard Deviation 0.68

Although the scores are all above 3 points (a positive note with regards to a listening course, as students find them challenging), the weakness of the 4-point-scale allows for a greater importance in the deviation. In other words, these results show that students felt the topics were anywhere from unimportant to very important. That said, the theme of the class is technology: current technology as it relates to the world. It can be argued that they are well aware of the technology and how it is being manipulated in their own lives, but may not be well aware of how technology is being manipulated by others to be directed at them, which was an underlying theme of the videos chosen. If this is the case, then the topics of this class were new to the students. Having taught the class, I can say with some assurance that these topics were new to the students *and* to the teachers. The scores are by this view fairly high in that we can see them as a rating of how the learners took-to new ideas about technology.

Part 2 asked students about specific tasks in the class. These related more directly to comprehension and acquisition.

### Part 2

Please rate some of the activities done in the EC2 Listening class.

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>1 = Strongly disagree</b><br><b>3 = Agree</b> | <b>2 = Disagree</b><br><b>4 = Strongly agree</b> |
|--|--|

- 30. Writing quiz questions helped me think about details of the videos more.**  
Average 3.17 / Standard Deviation 0.61
- 31. Reading related news articles for each unit helped me understand the videos.**  
Average 3.23 / Standard Deviation 0.67
- 32. I learned how to use more listening strategies in this class.**  
Average 3.08 / Standard Deviation 0.70
- 33. I learned how to use more notetaking strategies in this class.**  
Average 3.18 / Standard Deviation 0.65
- 34. Leading group discussions helped me to improve my English ability.**  
Average 3.15 / Standard Deviation 0.67
- 35. Doing Internet research was useful for me.**  
Average 3.01 / Standard Deviation 0.68
- 36. Sharing my Internet research helped me learn about several related topics.**  
Average 3.10 / Standard Deviation 0.61

Although questions don't ask specifically about objectives like noticing or stretching, the task that involve these objectives are subjects of the questions. Question 20, for example, relates directly to stretching in that the task required the learners to grasp sufficient amounts of the data within the unit and then manipulate it in a way that it could then work as a quiz for their peers. The reaction is positive in terms of the tasks relationship back to comprehension. Question 31 relates directly to the pre-listening exercises (usually done as homework), exercises that were designed to help students with comprehension. Question 35 is oddly negative. This could relate to students insufficient knowledge or to a poor design of the activity. The outcome of Question 35 is also odd in that the low rating doesn't connect with the higher rating of Question 36, a question that relates to their use of the research mentioned in Question 35. Question 36 relates again to stretching, as the task itself required students to learn the data

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of the unit, do related research, and then share the related research within groups. The higher rating reflects positively upon their impression of this exercise in stretching. Overall, the averages are similar to the averages in part 1. While the standard deviation rates are high for a 4-point scale, the averages remain above 3.

Part 3 allowed students to give qualitative feedback about the course and qualitative feedback to the instructor.

### Part 3

Please write your answers to the questions below.

- 37. Please give any comments about the topics and listening tasks used for this class and recommendations about what topics would be useful to you.**
- 38. Comments to your teacher:**

The feedback in this section was positive and directed to specific instructors of the course and related to the students' interest in the topics. Comments about the topics related often to Unit 5 of the text, which is also the highest rated in the evaluation. This unit discusses the use of video cameras by law enforcement in the United States, a subject that relates to Japan in that there are a prevalence of video cameras in Japan being used by law enforcement as well.

Here are some examples of feedback for question 37:

"I think technology is important."

"I think that Electronics' Dirty Secret is very interesting."

"I enjoyed listening program (sic) and I think many things about technology and world problems."

"More variations. For example about young people."

"Reduce homework."

"Homework of using video was useful for improving my listening skill."

Some feedback for question 38 was as follows:

"This class was very fun for me. Thank you for giving us class of nice atmosphere."

"Thank you very much."

"I think discussion is important, but I wanted to listening more about videos."

"Thank you for teaching me how to use more notetaking strategies."

Overall, this is relatively positive for a new course with that must apply to over 500 learners in a first-year cohort at various levels of ability.

## Teacher Evaluation Results

Teacher reactions to the overall course were positive. The topic of technology was open enough to allow additional information to be added by both the instructor and the student, and the grading and task choices available to the instructors (see Course Management) allowed for individuality in regards to student levels and teacher styles.

More specific areas of the tasks received more specific analysis by teachers and were therefore more apt to be the focus of need for change. The original course, for example, began in Units 1 and 2 with exercises that asked for more specific listening details. As the course progressed, the tasks focused on more global listening skills (i.e., the stretching mentioned above became more important). Teachers preferred future courses to have this pattern reversed. They suggested starting off with a more dominant prevalence of stretching type exercises and move into more of the noticing and restructuring exercises as the course progressed. This is an interesting request as it goes against current theory's ordering. The idea of reversing the order is, however, based on a very sound idea. The idea is to allow learners to gain confidence within the global exercises before being asked to account for more specific (and, in many ways, more dangerous with regards to saving face) bits of information. This reorder can be done, I think, while maintaining the original look of the two part balanced course by simply adjusting the more of the structured exercises to the later semesters.

Another request was for students to be required to do more listening outside of class. This is another excellent request. Of course it is a listening class and much of the actual listening should be done outside of class to allow for more acquisition activities in class, but this also allows students to get even more comprehension and noticing data to bring in to class. It also allows them to establish autonomous strategies to do so.

## Conclusion

Current SLA theory suggests listening course construction that combines comprehension exercises (top-down) with acquisition exercises (bottom-up). A listening course was designed to incorporate said

theory and combine both top-down and bottom-up related tasks in a two-week-part per single videotext system. The theme of the course was technology. The course was implanted in the middle of two other courses, part of a three part series in the English Language Program at the School of Policy Studies in Kwansei Gakuin University. Student feedback (n = 502) was taken in the form of a 4-point Likert-type questionnaire and items related to the incorporation of tasks related to current theory received generally positive feedback. Positive feedback was also received by teachers and was accompanied by several ideas to improve the current course. Of greatest interest was the idea to increase the bottom-up style exercises in the current course at an earlier point for the purpose of student confidence.

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## Appendix

The general questions and results for the course evaluation were as follows (n=502):

1=Strongly Agree; 2=Disagree; 3=Agree; 4=Strongly Agree

|   |   |
|---|---|
| 11. This course was valuable toward improving my English language skills.<br>英語の向上の点においてこの授業は価値のあるものだったと思う。 | Average 3.33<br>Standard Deviation 0.64 |
| 12. Overall, the content of the course was interesting.<br>全体的に見てこの授業の内容は興味深いものだった。                         | Average 3.18<br>Standard Deviation 0.71 |
| 13. The homework for this class was useful.<br>このクラスの宿題は役に立った。  | Average 3.08<br>Standard Deviation 0.73 |
| 14. The amount of homework for the course was appropriate.<br>宿題の量は適切だった。                                   | Average 3.09<br>Standard Deviation 0.70 |
| 15. The course is well connected to other courses in the ELP.<br>この授業は他の ELP の授業とうまく関連している。                 | Average 3.13<br>Standard Deviation 0.67 |
| 16. This course was the right level of difficulty for me.<br>授業の難易度は適切だった。                                  | Average 3.05<br>Standard Deviation 0.74 |
| 17. My own effort for this course was good.<br>自分はコースではよく努力した。  | Average 3.12<br>Standard Deviation 0.71 |
| 18. Overall, I am satisfied with this course.<br>授業を全体的に考えて見てこのコースに満足している。                                  | Average 3.17<br>Standard Deviation 0.72 |
| 19. The instructor explained things clearly in class.<br>授業中の先生の説明ははっきりとしていた。                               | Average 3.34<br>Standard Deviation 0.73 |
| 20. I could ask the instructor for help when necessary.<br>必要ならば先生に助けを求めることが出来た。                            | Average 3.38<br>Standard Deviation 0.72 |
| 21. The instructor created a comfortable classroom atmosphere.<br>先生は居心地の良いクラスの雰囲気を作ってくれた。                  | Average 3.42<br>Standard Deviation 0.72 |
| 22. The instructor graded my coursework fairly.<br>先生は私のコースワークを公平に評価したと思う。                                  | Average 3.36<br>Standard Deviation 0.66 |
| 23. The instructor made a good effort to help the students learn.<br>先生は生徒たちの学習に役立つように努力をしていた。              | Average 3.39<br>Standard Deviation 0.67 |

Though the scores all range between three and four, the standard deviation hovers around seven-tenths. The high deviation shows, of course, that opinions were varied within the answers. Higher scores come in questions 19 through 20 and show teachers.

We might look at the results of EC1 Listening using data from the same cohort and a similar evaluation form, in order to get a comparison for the course results.

|                           |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |      |
|---------------------------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|------|
|                           | 11.  | 12.  | 13.  | 14.  | 15.  | 16.  | 17.  | 18.  | 19.  | 20.  | 21.  | 22.  | 23.  |
| <b>Average</b>            | 3.42 | 3.34 | 3.23 | 3.28 | 3.28 | 3.31 | 3.02 | 3.05 | 3.32 | 3.38 | 3.35 | 3.44 | 3.40 |
| <b>Standard Deviation</b> | 0.75 | 0.77 | 0.78 | 0.77 | 0.78 | 0.78 | 0.84 | 0.86 | 0.78 | 0.78 | 0.82 | 0.81 | 0.85 |

Here we see a slightly higher rating for questions 11 through 16, scores that look very similar and a higher standard deviation. This could be due to a different set of teachers, teaching a different course (obviously), but could also be to the students being first-semester freshmen dealing with wanting to make a good impression while at the same time having to deal (many for the first time) with classes taught entirely in English. Questions 17 and 18 are, I think, important to compare. These show an improvement in learner autonomy, as students must, ultimately, want to be doing the tasks without feeling like they are wasting time.