

## Bridging Gaps in Teaching Listening for Integrated Control in English

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### Summary

This paper addresses the issue of enhancing what Palmer (1979) has termed *integrated control*<sup>(1)</sup> in English, which has been missing from the linguistic competence of the majority of Japanese students (Kakita, 1984). The first part of this paper deals with some of the difficulties that impede students from the desired goal of integrated control in English. These difficulties include the matter of speech rate, levels of student language knowledge, and issues of background information regarding the teaching material. In addition, the lack of integrated control in English among Japanese students is discussed, with reference made to statistical data. The second part introduces the basic philosophy of the teaching materials and teaching procedures in the listening course at Tottori University. Material preparation relates to the importance of written scripts in aiding students' comprehension in listening. The organization of each class is based on the theory put forward by Oka (1996), which is a modification of Krashen's Input Hypothesis.

### Introduction

In today's English educational environment in Japan, it is probably the enhancing of students' listening abilities that has received most attention. This has to do with the introduction of native speakers of English (ALTs) into many of the English classes where activities based on the written language formerly dominated. In fact, asked how they might employ "ALT-participated" class hours, 77.2 percent of the teachers polled replied that they would devote time to increasing students' listening skills (Adachi, Macarthur, Sheen, 1998, p.75). Moreover, the Japanese Ministry of Education revised the guidelines for English education and put an emphasis on oral/aural aspects of the language training by including Oral Communications A, B, and C into the senior high school curriculum. The sudden increase of attention to

teaching listening also highlighted some of the glaring difficulties which stand in the way of improving students' competence in listening. These difficulties suggest an apparent unattainability of integrated control in English through customary classroom activities. The desired competence, or the lack of it, is captured in Kakita (p. 51) as follows:

Unlike English learners in Venezuela, who have succeeded in integrating their skills in listening with other aspects of their language competence ("integrated control"), most Japanese learners instead end up with the "compartmentalized control" (Palmer, *ibid.*), in which listening abilities attained, if ever, stand isolated from other skills.<sup>(2)</sup>

The purpose of this presentation is first to examine some of those difficulties which are supposed to prevent students from gaining integrated control in listening. In the second part, proposals are made regarding how teachers can bridge gaps in the teaching process and help students achieve their desired goals.

### 1. Examinations of difficulties in the teaching process.

Unlike written discourse, its spoken counterpart forces the student into coping with the message at the speech rate more or less determined by the speaker. This is self-evident but causes a considerable amount of frustration both for the students and the teacher alike. Takefuta (1984, p. 60) has estimated that words are spoken at about "130 to 330 words per minute" during average conversations by Americans. Analyzing different data, Mochizuki (1989) made the following estimates:

VOA (regular program)	120	words per minute
VOA (special English)	90	words per minute
<i>Creative English Course</i>	130-140	words per minute

**Chart 1. Speech rates of spoken English.**

The issue of speech rate is also a matter of concern for the teacher. Some have proposed that the rate of speech be manipulated and that materials be presented to the student at a slower rate. Machida (1989), for instance, contends that "it is necessary for the teacher to modify the speech rate of the teaching material without distorting the rhythm and intonation patterns of the original utterances." While it seems to be a sensible suggestion, this proposal also raises some questions. For instance, we are not certain whether tampered materials remain a "natural" sample of utterances. It is more likely that the artificially prepared text ceases to be natural, and this is of little service, especially to those who would like to progress to more advanced levels. In other words, this proposal is less of an educational solution than a postponement. Furthermore, some experiments point to the possibility that slower rates may

not necessarily benefit certain groups of learners (Griffiths, 1990).

Another gap to be considered is the disparity between the scope of the language items in the teaching material and the linguistic knowledge of the student. The problem here is two-pronged: if the teacher tries to use the teaching material but ignores the student's level, meaningful activities are unlikely to take place. This is particularly true with listening activities, for "learners need to be familiar with more than 95 percent of the language materials to be heard" (Wakabayashi, 1989) in order to make any sense of what they hear. If, on the other hand, teaching materials are chosen for the lowest levels of students, they tend to be so unchallenging that they hardly merit attention from average students for an extended period of time. In either case, the variance often observed between these two proves to be an irksome obstacle to many a language teacher here. In addition to the vocabulary items and syntactic rules of the teaching material, the student is required to be knowledgeable about the background information of the content to be heard. The importance of this information cannot be overestimated. For instance, a group of researchers specializing in teaching listening skills observed the following: One's background knowledge of what is going to be heard is crucial in that it can affect the levels of comprehension either positively or negatively, depending on the amount of such information. Without such information, one comprehends very little no matter how hard one may concentrate on a stream of spoken words (Markham and Latham, 1987; ELEC Research Group No. 19, 1993). As a result, in preparing the student for new instructional material, the teacher has not only smaller units of words and grammatical items but also a larger unit of story schemata to think about.

The third issue to be considered here is other language skills which listening exercises are to affect. In theory, any aspect could be a target as long as it is part of language-related knowledge. For instance, Frescura (1991) proposes a listening activity where "the listening component rather than being pursued in and for itself, as an independent activity, is tightly integrated with reading, speaking and writing." In the experimental lessons offered at Tottori University, vocabulary items have been selected as a primary wedge into integrated control, for a solid command of vocabulary is widely believed to be a cornerstone of every successful language activity. More specifically, what is expected to be improved through the listening course is the current state of the majority of students, which is represented in the chart.

In the chart below, the figures at the top in each case are for Japanese senior high school students while those at the bottom are for returnees from overseas. As the chart indicates, the figures for Japanese students are considerably lower than those for returnees. In fact, they are so low that the interrelationship among skills above is virtually insignificant (Takefuta, 1984). One of the primary objectives of the listening course to be described in the next section is the improvement of the status quo through listening exercises, whereby the student's *compartmentalized control* in English would be elevated to the higher plane of integrated control.

	Scores in grammar	Scores in vocabulary	Scores in reading
scores in vocabulary test	.489 .773		
scores in reading test	.453 .759	.430 .700	
scores in listening test	.411 .875	.388 .674	.361 .705

**Chart 2. Correlation of scores in tests on different English skills of Japanese students.**

## 2. Bridging gaps in teaching listening.

Partly based on the past endeavors and partly on additional research findings, this section describes how the listening course is to be organized and conducted in the coming academic years. This experiment-oriented course has been offered for the past seven years with a variety of modifications added each year, and the present writers are planning to offer the same course, expanded both theoretically and practically, whose principles are elaborated in this presentation.

In general, one class lasts 90 minutes, and approximately 40 freshmen of the Faculty of Education are enrolled in this course every year. Some of the teaching materials used in the past years are those found in *The English Journal* (published by ALC). The teaching materials selected include many variations of English (Black English, male and female speakers' English, English with a New York accent, English spoken by a Guinean, and so on). In addition, these teaching materials deal with subject matters which are thought to be in accordance with the scope of intellectual development of the students: information on the overseas study trip to a college in Hawaii, aspects of American culture in the 1960s, the "hiphop" culture of African-Americans, high school life in New York, and so on. Some of these teaching materials are likely to be replaced with newer materials in the coming years, as the above-mentioned journal is issued monthly.

No matter what subject matter each of the teaching materials includes, the students generally find the speech rate of these materials too fast and phrases in English too long and/or complicated. In order to cope with these linguistic barriers, the students are encouraged to take advantage of the accompanying scripts coupled with their Japanese versions. These written scripts could serve students in several ways: first, glancing over the script in Japanese would help them appreciate the message of the speech, i.e., provide the background knowledge of the content, acting as a type of "anchoring frame" (Herron, Hanley, and Cole, 1995); second, the script in English could indicate to the students the precise area which might have

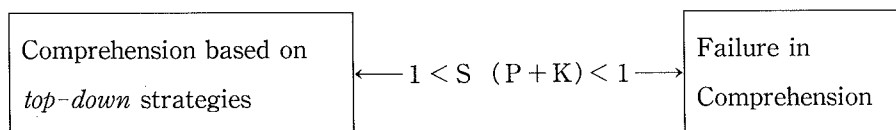
escaped them aurally due to reasons of speech rate or resulting distortions in sound, as Vogely (1995) notes that most of the learners could tell "when they understood something and when they did not." Furthermore, from the teacher's standpoint, Tatsumi (1994) asserts that "when found effective, the teacher should not shy away from employing the native language," and the written language as well, even in classes where the primary aim is to enhance the students' listening skills. Obviously, it is not common to have a written script involving English in front of us on a daily basis. And yet we teachers should be aware that classroom activities and real language use are not exactly identical (Itoh, 1988). What really matters is that viable classroom activities should incorporate features of the most effective teaching approaches, which Vandergrift (1997) characterizes as the ones in which "the learner perceives a gap in knowledge (comprehension problem) and assumes responsibility for the gap by utilizing a reception strategy." What the teacher needs to do is to provide the students with the means for these kinds of viable classroom activities to take place, activities which could be expected to lead the learner eventually to a competent level of English usage. Another advantage of these scripts makes it possible for the students to "convert less stable sensory memory codes into more enduring codes" (Greenberg and Roscoe, 1988).

Next, exercises aiming at vocabulary expansion are added before the teaching material is used in class. These exercises are an attempt to incorporate the listening activity into a larger objective of enhancing the students' integrated control in English. The basic approach behind these exercises might be termed *word-recycling* (after Wagner-Gough and Hatch, 1975), for the students are to be asked to review those high-frequency words they have learned before. Some researchers have argued that new vocabulary items be introduced through listening activities (see Tatsumi, for instance). In this approach, students would be burdened with the dual tasks of listening to and acquiring novel expressions. In the approach delineated here, however, the students would be freed at least from one of the tasks, for they need to review, not memorize, target expressions made up of words already familiar to them. Further advantages of this approach can be appreciated when we consider that "statistically speaking, the majority of words and phrases found in daily language use coincides with those found in the junior high school course books" (Takefuta, p. 45). Moreover, the students' familiarity with the form and a limited usage of high-frequency words does not ensure that they have a complete mastery over them. Lennon (1996), who has surveyed advanced students of English in Germany, has found that "easy" words are not necessarily easy to learn.

"Verb choices" are only the tip of the iceberg of these learners' problems with the correct usage of high-frequency verbs. The evidence is that learners may have a broad outline of verb meaning, but that their lexical knowledge is hazy concerning polysemy, contextual and collocational restrictions, phrasal verb combinations, and grammatical environment.

Combined, these findings indicate that more exercises on *easy* words are called for and that a firmer command of high-frequency words will be instrumental in increasing students' language abilities, be it for production or comprehension. Last, how each class is organized is

explained. Oka (1996) proposes a model for successful (and unsuccessful) comprehension in the listening process. Expanding on Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Oka illustrates his own view as follows:



**Diagram 1. Mechanisms of functional literacy.**

According to Oka, the diagram above represents what he calls *functional literacy*, in which K stands for one's knowledge about the world, P for the *bottom-up* strategies based on one's current linguistic knowledge, and S for one's communication strategies. Successful comprehension through listening will take place when the combined knowledge of K, P, and S exceeds the level represented by "1" (indicating the listening target involving unfamiliar items) because only then are the *top-down*-oriented comprehension strategies made use of. In contrast, cases where the combined knowledge of K, P, and S falls short of 1 lead to failure in aural comprehension.

Assuming that Oka is right in his reasoning, we need to organize each class so as to assist the student in activating the top-down strategies for comprehension. The written script and its counterpart in Japanese mentioned previously are to take care of the areas represented by P and K respectively. Added exercises on high-frequency words are expected to motivate the students into listening to the same material repeatedly, for they have to do so in a concentrated manner before they can find an answer for each question in the exercise. The teaching procedure sketched here is translated into a flow diagram and included in the appendix section of this presentation.

Although students spend quite an amount of time listening to material, limited class hours make it difficult to instill in the students the desired integrated control through listening. Therefore, individual studies using the same material are strongly encouraged. A quiz on the targeted items in word-recycling is given at the onset of the following lesson to evaluate students' efforts made at home and elsewhere. The quiz concludes one series of teaching procedures for a listening course aimed at fostering in the student integrated control of English.

## Conclusion

The traditional view is that listening abilities can be increased through exercises relying on spoken language to the exclusion of written language. This principle, although an oversimplification, is common among teachers of English. As a result of this, "efforts made by teachers and textbook writers notwithstanding, the ideal teaching material for listening has yet to be devised in this country" (Takefuta, p. 100). The mechanisms involved in the entire

process of listening comprehension seem to be more complicated than have been laid out in the past (cf. Hieke, 1987; Yule, Damico, and Hoffman, 1987; Vandergriff, 1996; see also Rubin (1994) for an extensive review on listening comprehension research), and as such, innovative teaching procedures have been proposed (cf. Godfrey, 1977; Allan, 1984; Jiaju, 1984; Sally, 1985; Goh, 1997). With Japanese students, in particular, the task of teaching listening proves even more troublesome. Because the majority of Japanese students have managed to acquire only a compartmentalized kind of competence, this task is plagued with a variety of difficulties. The approach introduced in this presentation aims at coping with these complex problems.

What is maintained throughout is the importance of a creative employment of the written language to assist in fostering integrated control in listening. The written language here includes both the target language and the native vernacular. Properly employed, they could function as one bridge to cross over the educational gap. This approach also bases itself on the exercise using many high-frequency words found in all teaching materials. The availability and usefulness of these words in language skills are assets not to be ignored: that is to say, productive use of these words could prove to be another bridge the teacher can lead the student over. The last section of this presentation has illustrated how actual teaching procedures in line with the approach above could be implemented, referring to the theoretical proposal for the process of successful comprehension in listening. Through these activities in class, coupled with additional individual efforts, students are expected to attain the desired goal of integrated control in listening.

### Notes

1. This ability is sometimes broadly called "general factor of language proficiency" (Fouly, Bachman, and Cziko, 1990) or less broadly defined as "commonality between listening and reading comprehension" (Buck, 1992). Although not using any technical terms, Boyle (1984), too, hints at the possible strong relationship between reading comprehension ability and listening comprehension ability. Current views generally agree that while there are differentiated linguistic skills, they all share common basic competence to certain degree. The central aim of this presentation is to explore how to enhance the learner's core ability by taking into consideration skills or knowledge formerly dealt with in isolation.
2. All the quotations from Japanese authors have been translated from Japanese into English by the present writers.

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## Appendix

## A Flow Diagram of One Lesson (to be 90 minutes long)

STEP 1	リスニング活動 No.1		( K + P ) S V 1 ↓ トップダウンの解 読 (の言語活動)
	目 的	予備的情報の収集	
	方 法	テキストなし	
	学生の活動	ノート・テイキング	
備 考	ダビング		
STEP 2	ディスカッション No.1		
	目 的	予備的情報の確認	
	方 法	個別に発表	
資料配付, 学生速読			
STEP 3	リスニング活動 No.2		
	目 的	大意理解と聞き取れない箇所の確認	
	方 法	テキストあり	
学生の活動	テキストへのマーキング, 等		
STEP 4	ディスカッション No.2		
	目 的	音声・書記言語の関連付け, 内容補足	
	方 法	発表, 説明	
学生の活動	テキストへのマーキング, 等		
STEP 5	リスニング活動 No.3		
	目 的	ワード・リサイクリングの演習	
	方 法	書き取り	
	学生の活動	聞き取ってから, ブランクへ記入	
備 考	解答は別紙に記入させる		
STEP 6	ディスカッション No.3		
	目 的	ワード・リサイクリング解説	
	方 法	発表	
学生の活動	確認・訂正		
STEP 7	リスニング活動 No.4		
	目 的	記憶に基づく予測的聞き取り	
	方 法	テキストなし	
学生の活動	マスター・テープから一斉に聞く		
家 庭 学 習			
ワード・リサイクリング小テスト			