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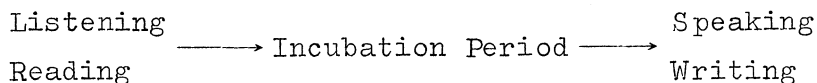
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AN EFFICIENT TYPE OF LISTENING COMPREHENSION TEST

Kenkichi Watanabe

In my preceding paper,⁽¹⁾ after suggesting a new order of learning a foreign language, that is:



I went on to emphasize practice in listening comprehension in order to avoid misconception on the part of some Japanese teachers of English that I was making light of the ability of listening comprehension. I said, "It goes without saying that in the present Japanese high-school and college classroom situations we must emphasize more listening to natural speed and authentic models of the foreign language the student is learning." The reason is that, apart from the fact that listening comprehension is of itself a very important skill, real reading comprehension is impossible without some kind of auditory training, because written material does not represent all features of a language, and such language signals as intonation, rhythm, stress and junctures are left out in its graphic representations.

From this we may conclude that, whatever motives the student may have for foreign language study, he cannot

(1) Incubation and Foreign Language Teaching, Studies in English Literature and Language, Kyushu University, No. 17, 1967.

neglect this phase of language learning. But Japanese high-school and college students are woefully deficient in the ability to comprehend spoken English, even after they have studied it for a few years. They may be able to decipher the written form of English by the vernacular fairly well, but this ability, translation from English into Japanese, will aid little in improving their listening comprehension, nor will the ability to translate assure real reading. In my experience, many college students do not comprehend the spoken form of English in a stream of utterance, even if the material is so elementary that they have fully mastered it in its written form.

This is inevitable because of the present college entrance examination situations where applicants' proficiency in English is tested almost exclusively in its written phase. But we should not leave these students as they are once they are admitted to college. We must supply them with abundant speech materials so that they will be able to master the skill of listening comprehension before they are graduated from college. One effective way of doing this is for a college or university to employ a large number of American or British instructors. But this is next to impossible except in a few colleges maintained by religious bodies where missionaries teach English. Where such instructors are not available, the taperecorder will now serve students in good stead. They will be able to listen to natural speed and authentic models of English as many times as they like or as often as the teacher thinks necessary.

Now that students are provided with listening comprehension facilities, should they be left to listen to the tape as they like? Though listening comprehension is

usually referred to as a passive skill, this does not mean that nothing takes place inside the listener's head. Neurons fire and stimulus-response chains are set up, if any comprehension at all takes place. But without some kind of testing it is difficult for the listener as well as the teacher to ascertain whether this comprehension is real comprehension or not, or how much the student has advanced in listening comprehension. There have been devised various kinds of tests for this purpose, for example, oral questions asked by the teacher concerning the content of the material the student has just heard, or written objective tests of the multiple choice type based on the content. The teacher may ask the student to translate orally some difficult words or phrases or even sentences, if necessary, into Japanese. Or he may ask him to tell or write a summary of what he has just listened to.

Though each of these tests have its own merits and demerits, it is undeniable that the teacher should find out in one way or another how much progress the student has made in listening comprehension. Not only is testing necessary for its own, but also it is necessary for improving listening comprehension skill. The reason is this: according to current operant conditioning theory, in order to make progress in listening comprehension, some kind of overt responding is necessary capable of obtaining certain satisfactions for the student in the form of comprehension and approval in classroom situations.

As one of the most effective types of testing as well as improving listening comprehension, I would like to suggest orthographic text dictation. This test is, in my opinion, particularly relevant in the present English classroom situations in Japanese colleges.

By orthographic text dictation I mean a dictation of a self-contained sentence or paragraph of about 10-100 words taken from contemporary sources that offer reasonable models of the written or spoken varieties of the language being learned. In order to test listening comprehension, the test should be read in a normal speech speed, and the dictation may be repeated as often as needed, depending on the listening ability of students. Dictated passages should be chosen from materials not already read or studied by students. After the dictation is over, the teacher either writes the dictation himself or asks one or two students to write their dictations on the board. After writing the dictation himself or correcting students' dictations, the teacher will ask students to mark their own dictations, giving minus 1 only to each omission or comprehension error such as "she rubs me" > "she loves me," and not to any mistakes that have no relations to meaning. For detailed description see my paper "Orthographic Text Dictation As an Effective Type of Limited Production Drill," Studies in English Literature and Language, Kyushu University, No. 18, March 1968, because what is described and discussed in the paper also applies to listening comprehension.

I have tried this type of testing and improving listening comprehension in college for a few years and have found that it is very effective, because it is not only easy to construct and administer, but also it is easy to mark. Even students themselves can mark their own dictations, thus enabling them to make instant self-appraisal as to their ability or progress in listening comprehension. The result will give them satisfaction or stimulus to further study. As I have mentioned above, Japanese college

students are fairly good at spelling but they are woefully deficient in the ability of listening comprehension. This applies to high-school students as well. Taking such situations into consideration, dictation is a very effective type of testing and improving listening comprehension. Moreover, this test fits well with my order of learning a foreign language mentioned at the beginning of this paper. According to my approach reading starts side by side with listening. This makes dictation practicable even at the first stage of foreign language learning. There must be an incubation period between receptive skill practice stages and productive skill practice stages. Abundant listening and reading comprehension practice plus an incubation period are indispensable for production. Thus, in my scheme of language learning dictation will play an important role in developing listening comprehension skill as well as improving production drill.