

Teachers' Beliefs and Practices Regarding Listening and Pronunciation

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Although listening is an important form of language input for English language learners, it may not always be a skill that is taught but merely one that is practised or assessed (Field, 2008). In this paper, the author investigates stated practices and beliefs regarding listening and phonology of EFL teachers in Japan. The majority of teachers surveyed stated a desire for more training in listening and phonology.

Rationale

Listening to English or any other language that is not one's first language is difficult. As Rost (2016) paraphrases Gafos (2013):

The listener's knowledge of and experience with these three systems, articulatory causes of sounds, the psychoacoustic effect of sounds and the likely linguistic intentions of a speaker – all maximize the efficiency of speech perception. At the same time, if the listener's knowledge or experience is incomplete or flawed, use of these systems will limit or distort perception. (Rost, 2016: ch. 2, 3/51)

This project set out to gather data regarding beliefs and stated practices regarding the teaching of listening and phonology among EFL teachers in Japan. The reasons for this are personal yet also have wider importance for the EFL community in Japan and even worldwide. I found that despite teaching for over twelve years, I had never questioned many of my practices and the area of practice that had the most unreflective ritual rather than rationalised, reflective practices was the teaching of listening. This is a worldwide issue due to the widespread use of similar listening practices suggested in supplementary teacher's books that accompany most internationally sold language textbooks by the major ELT publishers. I know I am not alone in this; a teacher based in Europe states, "I certainly know that I never really taught listening myself, pre-delta (sic). And I'm not sure how good I was post-delta (sic)." (Harrison, M. in Jones, M. [2015]).

This project was undertaken as part of the London Trinity LCTC Diploma in TESOL (DipTESOL) and was intended to investigate whether my own beliefs were shared, that is listening is rarely taught through bottom-up approaches or methods but largely top-down ones. The implications of this for learners may be that they spend time with the intention of learning the language but end courses of study still unequipped with the skills required for simple decoding of interlocutors' utterances, thus leading to communication breakdown. Part of the reason for this failure, I assumed, was the predominance of top-down processing being promoted - such as listening for key details – when bottom-up decoding of the speech signal from its constituent parts is entirely neglected. If phonemic decoding is never taught nor even acknowledged, learners are expected to develop skills without instruction but may be expected to just understand any listening texts that the teacher plays. While utterances may be subject to top-down processing, with known words and cognates being understood and used as a foundation for understanding, this may be unreliable and overreliance upon this strategy may lead to misunderstanding in all but the most basic contexts.

While such cases of communication breakdown may be a site for learning opportunities/affordances (Ellis, 1990) they may also be factors in learner demotivation. This is due to the affective factors involved; if learners are assumed to be able to just understand known words in L2, then little teaching is going on. Learners will therefore see the teacher as providing little assistance other than access to listening texts which cannot be understood and with little improvement in sight. Therefore, if teachers are to be seen as facilitators as well as instructors in an Instructed Second Language Acquisition environment, then the instruction of strategies and techniques to both decode and comprehend language ought not to be neglected.

In order to access the views of the Japan ELT community, I posted a link to a Google Form questionnaire on JALT forums on Facebook and LinkedIn. This gave me a significant sample size (n=51).

Hypotheses

The hypotheses I wished to gather evidence for are the following:

Bottom-up listening skills are focused upon less than top-down skills.

Teachers are already highly proficient users of English and their bottom-up processing in English is largely automatic as a learned process or a process in development. It is necessary to bear in mind because as Field (2008) states "the heavy emphasis placed by current methodology upon "comprehension" as the target of listening practice seems being a largely unconscious process, whereas learners' bottom-up processing is not automating have contributed to a perception that using contextual information is more central to successful L2 listening than recognising words and phrases accurately. The impression had perhaps been bolstered by experience of listening in a first language, and where our recognition of words is apparently effortless, as compared with the attention we need to devote to working out the speaker's intended meaning." (Field, 2008: ch.8 p.6/37) Thus, I hypothesise that teachers often focus upon top-down skills because they can more consciously follow their own listening strategies and teach such skills to students. In turn, as these teachers remain as senior members of educational institutions and gain responsibility for providing continuing professional development (CPD) to other teachers, they then transmit this prioritisation of top-down skills.

Teachers want more training in listening.

Due to the factors mentioned in the previous hypothesis, teachers do not feel knowledgeable about how to teach bottom-up listening skills, only about practising listening as a whole. The ramifications for this, if found to be true, are that learners' acquisition of L2 listening skills may be delayed, thus leading to a lack of effectiveness in teacher-provided input, and therefore inability to decode authentic listening texts unassisted either inside or outside the classroom.

Phonology is taught mainly at word level.

Citation forms of words are available to be checked in pronunciation dictionaries and most learners' dictionaries. However, multi-word units, while present in many learners' dictionaries, are not always given with pronunciation transcription showing that how the words that make up the unit may change slightly from their citation form in ways such as weak forms, elision, assimilation, linking and stress changes. Intonation may also be dismissed because it is often seen as fuzzy, with McCarthy (1991) stating "it would seem open to question whether any direct intonational and grammatical correlates exist" (p.106) and that "we cannot reliably label a tone contour as displaying a particular attitude or emotion" (ibid. p.107). However, there are some standard functions of intonation in English that can aid learners in ensuring speakers' intentions are understood inasmuch as intonational units tend to correspond to grammatical units such as sentences and clauses (Field, 2008: ch. 11, p.3/41), for example, rising intonation on all list items except the final one which has falling intonation.

Method

Sample

The research was carried out by creating a questionnaire in Google Forms and posting the link in the Tokyo Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT) Facebook group, the JALT group on LinkedIn, English Teachers in Japan (ETJ) group on LinkedIn and emailing acquaintances. The questionnaire was anonymous in order to gain participation from the teaching community without privacy concerns.

The limitations of the sample are that it comes from groups involved in teacher development (TD) and therefore their members are motivated to continue their professional development. Due the interest in TD these teachers are likely to be pro-active in acquiring skills that they realise they lack by reading methodology books, journals and other teaching periodicals. Conversely, if teachers do not realise that they are lacking skills they will not seek out development opportunities or literature. Furthermore, this sample does not contain a large number of practitioners without ELT credentials.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was organised in two sections: teachers' stated classroom practices regarding listening and phonology; this was followed by stated beliefs and level of qualification. The stated classroom practices were assigned a scale of frequency. This scale of frequency is related only to the answers at the individual level. One respondent's "always" may not be equivalent to the frequency of classroom practice as the same answer for a different respondent. It is merely the teacher's perception of their own classroom practice. For example, Teacher A may state that they always teach intonation in sentences. Teacher B may state the same thing. However, Teacher B may teach the intonation patterns used in listening tasks as well as elsewhere in the lesson, whereas Teacher A may only teach it in listening tasks. The reason for not choosing a numerical frequency is that it was considered easier for teachers to assign a fuzzy value to a belief regarding general practice than a numerical frequency over a given period (e.g. "once per lesson" or "three

times a week”). Were a numerical value chosen by respondents and provided inaccurately, comparing subsequent answers to those of preceding questions may also compound inaccuracy.

Data Analysis

Teachers’ Stated Practices

Pre-tasks and pre-teaching

The vast majority of teachers pre-teach new vocabulary in order to prepare their learners for listening, with 49 teachers who pre-teach vocabulary “sometimes” and more frequently. This roughly correlates with the number of teachers who do topic-based elicitation pre-tasks “sometimes” and more frequently, which is 46.

Of those teachers that never or rarely do topic-based elicitation pre-tasks, vocabulary tends to be pre-taught, with only one teacher stating that they never do topic based elicitation pre-tasks and rarely pre-teach vocabulary.

Prediction is frequently taught as a strategy in the EFL classroom because it can activate schema, such as known vocabulary on a given topic or likely grammar structures to be used. However, it should be considered that one would rarely be given access to gapped utterances of an interlocutor or parties one is listening to in situations outside the classroom.

Phonology

Phonology is one of the areas with which teachers stated that they struggle (see section 4.2.2) yet in teachers’ stated practices it appears that pronunciation teaching does occur. This means that one of the following is true: a) teachers rarely teach pronunciation and gave answers that reflect this; b) teachers teach pronunciation through unsophisticated and overly simple means only and do not understand how to teach pronunciation effectively but to rely on providing negative feedback when errors occur and positive feedback when correct pronunciation is realised; or c) teachers teach pronunciation but gave unreliable information about their theoretical and/or practical knowledge and confidence in applying it in the classroom.

As can be observed in the table in appendix 1, as the length of linguistic item gets longer, the more likely it is for teachers to state that they neglect the teaching of its phonology, the evidence being the increase in “rarely” or “never” answers with the increase in length of linguistic item. One clear reason for this appears to be complexity but it may be the case that teachers consider longer utterances (at the phrase or sentence level) to be merely made up of words in the citation form or that they neglect consideration of aspects of connected speech at the lesson-planning stage. It may also be the case that those teachers who rarely teaching pronunciation lack subject knowledge in this area, and therefore lack confidence in teaching it effectively. This may be reflected in the results for teachers expressing a desire for more training in phonology (see section 4.2.2)

Teaching stress is important because, at the utterance level, stress on the wrong word and/or syllable can alter the message and at the word level it can impair intelligibility. In addition, strong syllables facilitate connection to utterances and aid comprehensibility (Field, 2008).

At the word level, the majority (78%) of respondents stated that they teach stress in words sometimes or more frequently. This is markedly different to sentence stress, which 58% of respondents stated they teach sometimes or more frequently.

Intonation is stated by the teachers to be taught more often than pronunciation of sentences and stress in sentences. More than 33 teachers provided an answer of sometimes or more frequently regarding their teaching of intonation, as opposed to the 24 who stated that they teach pronunciation of sentences sometimes or more frequently and the 29 who stated that they teach stress in sentences sometimes or more frequently. The number of teachers who stated that they teach these aspects of phonology is roughly the same, at between 14-18 respondents.

Teacher Beliefs

Teacher Beliefs About Teaching Listening and Pronunciation

There appeared to be a small majority, just one teacher over half of the sample, who believed that they assess listening more often than they teach listening. This was less than I expected due to the number of coursebooks on the market with listening exercises designed only to practise or test comprehension skills. The responses to the questionnaire could be taken to mean that just under half the teachers perceive practice to be the same as teaching, that they are actively involved in providing strategies to their learners more often than they assess listening skills or that they know that teaching listening is important yet lack the knowledge or skills necessary and thus state that they teach more often than they assess and refused to answer honestly.

There can be a tendency among teachers to assume that they are teaching a listening lesson when they are merely using the audio texts as a method to present language rather than practice skills. However, as Field (2008) states, “The prevailing tendency in the

teaching of listening is to provide practice and more practice without clearly defined goals. How comfortable would we feel about and approach to speaking which told learners to simply ‘get on with the task’ and provided no pronunciation teaching, no modelling, no controlled practice, no pragmatic input and little feedback?”(Field, 2008: Introduction, 4-5/14).

Just over half the teachers use listening tasks to present language to students (27/55 respondents). This means that listening may not be a means unto itself, but that listening tasks are vehicles for the transmission of linguistic artefacts, perhaps through an input flood (Loewen & Reinders, 2008 p.92). With this approach, it is unlikely that authentic (regarding English used outside the classroom) texts are used, but pedagogical texts. Pedagogical texts tend to be slower and scripted (to include instances of grammatical usage or lexical chunks). Furthermore, if used to the exception of all else, they lead to learners being underexposed to authentic language, with its false starts, mumblings and mutilation from background noise.

Just over half of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they mainly use listening tasks to present language intended to be produced at a later stage of the lesson. This reinforces the view that listening is mainly practised rather than taught by approximately half of the sample. If listening skills are rarely taught, then most learners cannot develop the skill because we rely upon learners to trial strategies that they have not been informed about, finding greater or lesser success in listening in relation to these strategies.

Almost all respondents expressed the belief that teaching pronunciation aids listening development, with only two expressing disagreement and none expressing strong disagreement. However, as mentioned above, over half of the sample (thirty or more) who do teach pronunciation teach it “sometimes” or “rarely”. From this it may be inferred that teachers know pronunciation aids listening yet do not prioritise the explicit teaching of pronunciation in the classroom.

Two thirds of the respondents stated agreement or strong agreement with the statement, “Students need listening activities in the classroom just for exposure.” If this were the case, the role of explicit teaching of listening in the language classroom would be severely diminished; if exposure were the primary purpose then listening activities are essentially whole-group extensive listening exercises. Such exercises are aimed at providing comprehensible input (Krashen, 1982). However, where Krashen’s $i+1$ construct (where input should be pitched just above the learner’s current level of comprehension [Krashen, 1982]) may be argued to be ineffective in whole-group situations due to $i+1$ being dependent upon the individual. If one could pitch input as $i+1$, in any class it would be likely that the median level of learner would receive correctly pitched comprehensible input whereas the higher level would likely receive $i \leq 1$ (i.e. known, thus inefficient for learning) and the lower level would be likely to receive $i > 1$, (i.e. containing a significant proportion of incomprehensible input, thus also inefficient for learning).

Respondents do, however, have their learners listening for sounds. Approximately 63% of respondents stated that they agreed with the statement in Fig. 16. This indicates that bottom-up listening skills are being taught at least implicitly and at least occasionally.

Teacher Beliefs About Training

Most of the respondents did not agree that their in-house training involved a phonology/phonetics element. This is unsurprising and may be seen as one of the causal factors in respondents not teaching pronunciation beyond word level, with a general trend toward sticking to word-level pronunciation and intonation, and a tendency toward student exposure to the target language.

However, a majority of respondents stated that they have received training to teach effective listening activities. It may be inferred either that most teachers see phonology as unimportant to listening activities, or else that they have received phonology/phonetic training as part of their personal professional development outside of work (for example, through teachers’ organizations). However, a majority of teachers expressed a desire for more training in the teaching of listening and in phonology. Whether this is due to perceived lack in classroom skill or merely a desire for CPD would benefit from further research.

Despite the trend toward agreeing their in-house training has equipped them to teach effective listening activities, approximately 75% respondents stated that they would like more training in teaching listening, although only approximately 21% expressed this strongly. Furthermore, approximately 70% of respondents agreed that they would like more training in phonology, again with only approximately 21% having expressed this strongly. Most respondents gave roughly similar answers regarding the desire for further training in teaching listening and in phonology, with only one respondent’s answer moving by a value of two on this scale.

If teachers have received training to teach effective listening activities, what is the stimulus for the desire for further training in listening? It may lie beyond activities, such as listening for details or examples of connected speech, and be connected to the interest in further training in phonology. Again, this warrants additional research.

Discussion

As can be seen above, the answers to the questionnaire are not always straightforward, with some questions regarding classroom practices and teacher beliefs more divisive than others, particularly the teaching of pronunciation beyond the word level and whether listening is tested more often than taught and whether it is used to present language to be used in later output. The stated classroom practices may not be wholly accurate reflections of what the respondents actually do in their classrooms but only their stated practices; that is, the respondents may have stated practices that they do not undertake or practices that they believe themselves to undertake yet do not actually do so.

Teachers' stated beliefs about their developmental needs and their judgements thereof are more reliable than the statements of practices. The degree to which their practices are reflected in their statements cannot be ascertained by means of a questionnaire: that would require observation on a scale that is beyond the scope of this project; however, beliefs underpinning practices themselves are more easily captured.

Conclusion

Bottom-up listening skills are focused upon less than top-down skills.

My hypothesis regarding the focus upon top-down listening skills being greater than that of bottom-up skills may neither be confirmed nor unconfirmed. While it is clear, according to respondents' answers, that teachers are teaching gist and listening skills a great deal of the time, they are also teaching word-level phonology (pronunciation and stress) which would aid decoding, though as the length of linguistic item increases (i.e. from word to phrase to utterance) the likelihood of the phonological aspects being taught decreases. To extrapolate this further with an example, the likelihood of teaching of consonant clusters and their differences is more likely to be taught than aspects of connected speech, which in turn would be more likely to be taught than the intonation pattern for lists. Certainly, with prediction activities being frequently taught, and with vocabulary being more often pre-taught than not, it is clear that top-down processes are used widely in the teaching of listening.

Teachers want more training in the teaching of listening.

It is clear that the respondents favour more training in listening and phonology, despite the majority having stated that they have been trained to teach effective listening activities. Therefore if organisations provided more training on listening and phonology to their teachers, including sharing effective practices of those who are highly skilled and/or experienced in using a wide repertoire of techniques to teach listening, it would be seen as useful by a majority of teachers.

Phonology is taught mainly at word level.

In this study it is clear that more teachers teach pronunciation at word level than at either the phrasal or sentence level. However, it is not possible to make a definite assertion that phonology is taught mainly at word level. A significant number of teachers teach pronunciation at the word level but also teach it at the phrasal level regularly. In addition, although the majority of teachers surveyed teach stress at the word level, intonation is regularly taught, generally at sentence level. Whether this is due to intonation and stress being relatively easy to teach compared to other aspects of phonology requires more research.

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Appendix 1

Question: "How often do you:"	Frequency				
	Always	Often	Sometimes	Rarely	Never
Pre-teach vocabulary?	14	17	18	2	0
Do topic-based elicitation pre-tasks?	14	24	8	2	3
Complete gap-fill activities before listening?	3	8	20	13	7
Teach pronunciation of words?	11	11	19	10	0
Teach pronunciation of phrases?	7	11	16	14	3
Teach pronunciation of sentences?	4	9	11	19	8
Teach stress in words?	10	13	16	8	4
Teach stress in sentences?	5	13	13	14	6
Teach intonation?	7	12	14	13	5

Appendix 2

Question: Indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with the following statements.	Level of Agreement			
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I assess listening more than I teach listening.	6	20	18	7
I mainly use listening tasks to present language I want students to use at a later stage of the lesson.	5	22	19	5
Teaching pronunciation aids listening development.	18	31	2	0
Students need listening activities in the classroom just for exposure.	9	25	12	5
Students do not hear enough native speech outside the classroom so they need to practise gist and detail exercises.	21	22	8	0
Listening tasks develop better student pronunciation.	8	31	12	0
I have learners listen only for sounds sometimes.	4	27	13	7
My in-house training has involved a phonology/phonetics element.	7	11	16	17
I have received training to teach effective listening activities.	7	24	14	6
I would like more training in teaching listening.	11	28	11	1