

Listening Comprehension Strategies and Analysis of STEP Test

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Perception of Listening Comprehension and CLT

Listening comprehension in language teaching field is a largely neglected area. Recent focus on communicative teaching has shifted its focus from forms to meanings and we have seen an upsurge in the number of textbooks and materials that place priority on meanings. These textbooks and materials, however, tend to prioritize speaking activities in class and it is still difficult to find materials or textbooks that are entirely geared toward cultivating students' listening ability.

This reality stems from the wrong perception of communicative approach that is a hot subject in the second and foreign language teaching profession. To modify this situation, we need to have a clear idea of what communicative approach is and what it is not.

Communicative approach is believed to consist of several key components that are believed to be essential parts of communication. One model offered is that of communicative competence (Savignon 1972, 1983, 1987, Canale and Swain 1980). Communicative competence is defined as consisting of four key components, sociocultural, strategic, discourse, grammatical.

Discourse competence is not concerned with discrete words or phrases but rather to do with whole structure of the text and understanding of the purpose of the text.

Sociocultural competence is concerned with a learner's knowledge of social norms and cultural norms of the target language. Included in this is the understanding of proper ways of addressing the partner in the conversation and using socially acceptable forms of language depending on the topic, context, and the interlocutor. Recently we have seen an increase in the number of research in this field related to scripts and schema that has strong bearing on the social aspect of a language. Schema and scripts are culture specific knowledge of a language that help people decode and process a message.

Strategic competence refers to repairing strategies that we use when communication breaks down by misunderstanding or distraction. This includes asking for repetition of a sentence or asking for clarification of the partner's utterance.

Grammatical competence is the area that has taken the central focus in language teaching so far. In recent years, however, we have come to understand that language learning does not consist of grammatical competence alone and multi-layer of factors are involved.

We have seen so far what communicative approach entails and what it is about. We will shift our focus to why listening comprehension has been neglected in the field of language teaching. With the strong focus on grammar translation teaching lasting for a long time, the backlash was the urge to place priority on speaking. For a long time listening has been regarded as an receptive activity rather than an active one with speaking considered as the active end. This atmosphere created an atmosphere where communicative teaching is about students talking as much as they can during the class and engaging them in group or pair work.

This perception of communicative language teaching is not adequate. Listening is an important part of communicative behavior and as various literature in language acquisition research suggests, listening is a prerequisite for speaking and therefore it plays an central role in language acquisition. For effective listening, learners have to utilize various strategies and it is a complex process. Communicative teaching does not exclude listening from the focus of concern and reading and writing also are important areas of communicative teaching. The essence of this approach is its emphasis on exchange and transfer of meaning and its process.

In this thesis, I will delineate types of listening process and strategies involved. I will also analyze a listening comprehension section of a STEP test to see what kind of listening strategies are needed for students and how we can better instruct students on these strategies.

Three Dimensions of Listening

In the previous chapter, I have mentioned how listening activity is far from being passive activity and it is in fact a very active activity which involves myriad of strategies in the process of decoding. In this chapter I will come up with various listening situations and these situations will fit into the three dimensions of listening acts identified by linguists.

We engage ourselves in different kinds of listening activities in daily lives, I will be listing some examples of listening activities that we come across below.

1. listening to casual conversation
2. listening to a presentation at a company
3. listening to a class or a lecture
4. listening to a doctor's advice at a hospital
5. listening to a sermon at a church
6. listening to a radio
7. watching news on the TV
8. enjoying theatrical plays
9. listening to (pretending to be listening to) speeches at a wedding
10. Listening to yourself as you speak to yourself etc.

Bidirectional	Unidirectional
Autodirectional	

Chart 1.

Bidirectional Mode

Refer to chart 1. I have created this chart based on three dimensional modes of listening acts identified by Denes and Pinson (1963). "The obvious mode is bidirectional communicative listening." Bidirectional listening is a listening activity we encounter the most in daily lives. The flow of information between the two speakers is reciprocal. Example 1. listening to casual conversation falls under this category and so does 2. listening to presentations if the listener engages in active questioning for more information and more clarity. Listening to a doctor's advice probably will fall under this category provided that the doctor is well aware of the concept of informed consent.

Unidirectional Mode

Unidirectional mode represents one way flow of information. Example 3. listening to a lecture or a class, 6. listening to a radio, etc. fall under this category. In this mode of listening act, the listeners take a receptive mode and take a self-dialogue manner as we try to process what we have heard.

Autodirectional Mode

Closely related to the previous unidirectional mode is autodirectional mode, it seems rare that we talk to ourselves often but we do engage in this act and we are hearing ourselves either externally or internally. We hear ourselves externally when we trip over a stone and speak vulgarity or when we express a surprise at an unexpected event. We often resort to internal listening act when we try to make up our mind or when we are actively engaging ourselves in philosophical thinking. We may not hear these words as actual sounds but we do know that since language is an intricate part of our thinking system, our linguistic capacity is activated when we engage in cognitive exercise.

Unidirectional Mode Underlie Our Listening Process?

I have written that we engage ourselves in unidirectional process when we process what we hear from other speakers. This, however, is one view of listening process of a listener. This view implies that listeners try to reproduce what they have heard in their mind in order to understand the interlocutor's intention. A successful listener in this sense is defined as one who is able to reproduces the speaker's meaning in his mind. (Clark and Clark 1977). A second view (Rost 1990) places more emphasis on listeners constructing meaning. This view implies that listeners resort to his prior knowledge of the content and the context to draw most appropriate meaning and inferences about what he has heard. This is in line with schemata theory (Rumelhart), scripts theory (Schank 1975), and frames theory (Minsky 1975). These theories regard knowledge about a certain culture, discourse, and rhetorical conventions have a strong bearing on the language learners understanding of a target language. Whatever the view of listening comprehension is, we can see that listening is far from receptive act and it is very complex and active.

Listening Strategies

Various types of listening comprehension have been proposed. We all have experiences of struggling with listening activities. Beginners especially have trouble with understanding the segments of words and they hear the target language as jumble of sounds at first. They also tend to focus too much on grammatical features and structures and they easily lose the forest for the trees. Beginners have a tendency to want to understand everything because of their enthusiasm and as a result they get overwhelmed with too much information at hand.

Advanced learners on the other hand have learned to pick up information they need and do not have to listen to every single word to understand the intended meaning of a speaker. We all engage in this kind of listening as a native speaker of our mother language. When we are watching TV, or listening to a radio program, we never listen to

each word but we know the general meaning of what we are hearing.

Bottom-Up strategy for beginners

I will suggest several ideas for cultivating beginners listening strategies.

Bottom-Up strategies refer to paying attention to small units of a speech. Teachers can expect some benefit from

- 1) Getting the students to discriminate rising intonation and falling intonation to teach how intonation affects meaning.
- 2) Getting the students to listen to minimal pairs and learn characteristics of English phonetics.
- 3) Getting the students to pay attention to the ending of verbs to identify their meaning.
- 4) Getting the students to pay attention to fillers, such as “well”, “you know”, “like”, “I mean”. Identifying these fillers will help learners to better understand the core message of a sentence without being distracted by fillers.

Top-Down strategies for beginners

- 1) Getting the students to listen to a conversation and identify the speakers feelings and emotions.
- 2) Getting the students to listen to a dialogue and guess where the conversation is taking place, identify the relationship between the speakers.
- 3) Getting the students to define a topic of the conversation.

Bottom-up strategies for advanced learners

- 1) Getting the students to utilize their knowledge of the content of the topic they are going to listen to and write a brief essay about the content. For example, before listening to a tape of a lecture on global warming, get the students to write about the possible causes of the problem and some solutions.
- 2) Getting the students to read the introduction of a lecture to predict its focus. (Lebauer 2000, pp. 49-51)
- 3) Getting the students to read a newspaper article about a particular topic either in Japanese or English and get them to listen to news broadcast on radio on that topic.

Richard's Functions / Process Chart

Richards (1990) proposes a very useful way of combining language functions and listening process. He has created this from earlier research by Brown and Yule. Brown and Yule (1983) have given two ways of differentiating language functions. One

function is interactional and the other is transactional. Interactional function person-oriented and it refers to linguistics activities that are used to maintain social relationships rather than those that are concerned with giving information or orders to the interlocutor. Transactional function is message-oriented and it refers to linguistic activities that are focused on conveying information, such as giving explanation, instruction, orders, asking for directions and so on.

	INTERACTIONAL		
BOTTOM-UP	1	2	TOP-DOWN
	3	4	
	TRANSACTIONAL		

Chart 2

Refer to chart 2. This is a chart proposed by Richards, and he provides us a way of classifying listening activities that are classified according to its linguistic function and listening process. Some examples for each cell in the chart provided by Richards are as follows.

Cell 1: Listening closely to a joke in order to know when to laugh.

Cell 3: Listening closely to instructions during a first driving lesson.

Cell 2: Listening casually to a cocktail party talk.

Cell 4: Experienced air traveler listening casually to verbal air safety instructions.

Morito's Function / Process/ Mode chart

Based on the chart provided by Richards, I have created another chart which also incorporates two listening mode, unidirectional and bidirectional. Chart 3 is the model.

	INTERACTIONAL				
BOTTOM-UP	Unidirectional 1	Bidirectional 2	Unidirectional 3	Bidirectional 4	TOP-DOWN
	Unidirectional 5	Bidirectional 6	Unidirectional 7	Bidirectional 8	
	TRANSACTIONAL				

Chart 3

Chart 3 incorporated two listening functions, listening processing, and listening modes.

Interactional

- Cell 1: Listening to a joke at a party closely to know when to laugh.
- Cell 2: Engaging in a verbal fight and listening carefully to spot the other speaker's fault to counter attack.
- Cell 3: Listening casually to a party talk.
- Cell 4: Listening to a casual telephone conversation to express appropriate reactions to the other speaker, expressing condolences for bad news, etc.
- Cell 5: Listening carefully to an instruction to use a new computer.
- Cell 6: Listening to a press conference or a presentation on a particular topic and asking for more information and clarity in the question session.
- Cell 7: Listening to a weather forecast casually on the radio and finding out tomorrow's weather.
- Cell 8: Listening to a student's excuse about his delayed assignment, "I could not finish my assignment because....." and cutting him off to give him a piece of advice.

We have looked at listening functions, listening process and two listening modes and came up with some examples that fit into each category. A glance at this chart shows that listening is a very complex process that entails myriad of factors. Based on a belief that focusing and analyzing these factors will lead to better teaching of listening skills, I will analyze a listening section of a STEP test to see what kind of listening factors are tested and how we can better prepare our students for the test.

Analysis of STEP Listening Section

In this chapter, I will analyze each listening question of a pre-se cond grade STEP test, eiken jyun-2 kyu and try to come up with a profile for each question. Listening section consists of two sections, section one requires the students to listen to a dialogue and choose the most appropriate response to an utterance in the dialogue. Section two asks students to listen to a dialogue and students have to answer a question about the dialogue. Another kind of question in this section is answering a question about a passage broadcast on the tape.

No1

"Sales department"

"May I speak to Mr. Nicholson?"

"I'm sorry, he's on another line."

In this question the examinees have to choose "May I leave a message?" as an appropriate response. This utterance in question is transactional and also bidirectional, the speaker needs to find out if Mr. Nicholson is in or not so this requires a bottom-up approach. In Chart 3, it fits into cell 6.

No.2

“Jill, what’s going on?”

“This bag is too heavy for me to carry.”

“Here, let me help you with it.”

In this question the answer will be “ Thank you.” The answer in question is interactional since one speaker is offering for help and the other accepts it establishing a social relationship. The mode is bidirectional and the process is top-down. It will fit into cell 4.

No.3

“Do you have any plans for this weekend?”

“No. I have no plans. But why?”

“Tom is planning to barbecue party at his house.”

The answer to this question is “Sounds great.” This is interactional and bidirectional. Answering the question needs top-down approach. It will fit into cell 4.

No.4

“Why are you in such a hurry, Jim?”

“I’m on my way to the library. It closes at six.”

“Didn’t you know the library has been closed since Monday?”

“Oh, no! I need history textbooks for tomorrow’s test.”

Question: Why can’t Jim borrow history books?

The conversation is bidirectional and answering the question needs bottom-down processing. The nature of this conversation is transactional so it will fit into cell 6.

No.5

“Could you give me a ride this afternoon, Peter?”

“Sure, Kate. Where shall I pick you up?”

“How about at the main gate?”

“Well, the back gate would be better.”

Question: What’s Peter going to do?

This conversation is bidirectional and transactional in nature, answering this question requires top-down approach so it will fit into cell 8.

No.6

“Can I meet you sometimes next week?”

“Sure. I’ll be free on Tuesday morning and Friday afternoon.”

“Would Friday at two be all right?”

“Certainly. I will see you then.”

Question: When will they meet?

This is a clear bidirectional transactional conversation which needs a bottom-down approach. It will fit into cell 6.

No.7 to No.9 consists of listening to a passage and answering a question that requires attention on the details.

No.7

Kenta loves cats. On his way home from school, he often drops in at a pet shop and looks at those cute kittens show there. He really wants to keep one as a pet, but pets are not allowed in his apartment. He hopes that someday his family will move to a house where he can keep a pet as a pet.

Question: Why can’t Kenta keep a pet?

No.7~No9 are all unidirectional and requires the students to listen to particular information, so they are transactional in nature and need bottom-up approach. They will all fit into cell 5.

As can be seen from the above analysis of the listening section based on my chart, the questions are evenly spread over different category and thus we can conclude that students listening ability is tested in entirety.

Conclusion

For a long time, listening has been considered as passive act with speaking as active act. However, as we can see from this paper listening entails various factors and it is a very complex process. We have also come to understand that beginners and advanced learners resort to different strategies to process incoming information.

In the analysis of STEP listening section, I have shown how the test tries to utilize various kinds of listening strategies and listening process and modes. I believe that encouraging English learners to become aware of these factors will help them understand more about listening activity and help them become more adept at listening to English.

We would need to have more research in the area of listening ability to understand focusing on which aspect of listening process is the most important for effective listening.

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