

A Communicative Approach to Listening

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Successful foreign language communication depends on listening ability just as much as speaking. Consider the challenge: listening takes place in real time. In many cases, it occurs outside of a person-to-person conversation, for example a public announcement or a lecture. The traveler in a station or the student in a lecture hall cannot push a rewind button. Midstream there might be several competing versions of linguistic and pragmatic meanings floating in the listener's head. Rost (1990, pp. 47-56) details the listener's effort to make the process more efficient: she tries to follow the context of the incoming utterance, 'listening ahead' in anticipation of what is to come, while simultaneously reconstructing what was just said. She is challenged to make a final decision as to the overall meaning in real time, without hesitation. If something is misheard, the meaning can change entirely, and the listener may be aware of this. In the end, she may be left to doubt her understanding; repeatedly parsing a fragmentary received acoustic output in a short-term memory loop for overall meaning. Often, memory of utterances is not perfect. In the short term, the entirety of what was heard cannot be reproduced verbatim, and this applies to native language listeners, too. Even in the long term, except for particularly memorable or important utterances, what was heard only remains as meaning, not as individual word units. The act of listening is, therefore, a complex neurological process that happens in brief instances, and

it is one of the fundamental four skills associated with foreign language learning. As such, an implementation of activities that reflect that process stands to help foreign language learners achieve a higher measure of ability.

Background

This paper comes out of being assigned to teach a first-year listening class for students majoring in English. I came into class with the idea of developing a pedagogy based around Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and a learner-centered class set-up that I had developed for other classes (see Murphy & Rian, 2014; Murphy, 2013a; Murphy, 2013b; Rian, 2014). Instinctively, I knew teaching listening required something more than the cursory treatment found in widely-used course books. However, I started the school year and the new class with only an assigned listening textbook and vague listening skills pedagogy based on language conference presentations. In the first few weeks of following the book, I noted how the students passively took in the listening passages. Most of them short-circuited the listening process—and more importantly, their own education—by relying on reading the transcripts in the back of the textbook to understand meaning and do well on my quizzes without really listening at home. I asked myself what I was teaching. Was I really teaching listening skills? Further, I wondered whether the learners were engaged more in reading and grammar exercises in the assigned textbook, or were they only paying attention to explanations of the aural text. In other words, were they learning how to listen, or were they simply waiting for correct answers?

This short study is a preliminary one. It treats listening broadly, and is the first step in examining the challenges—through trial and error—of establishing a workable pedagogy to effectively teach the skill of listening in the university EFL context, particularly a learner-centered CLT-based one. Its goal is to associate the classroom task of listening with a real-life purpose (Littlewood, 1981) and the act of “using English to learn it. (Howatt, 1984, p. 279)” While this may sound like a mere slogan, approaches to CLT, a weak version versus and strong version, vary greatly in terms of the learner’s in-class experience and ability to retain and acquire greater language ability. I would argue that the constant need to discuss what is heard in the listening text falls into the latter strong version category. In this setup, learners are encouraged to use whatever language they are capable of producing in L2 in order to negotiate the semantic and contextual aspects of a listening text in order to arrive at an overall possible meaning. By their nature, CLT classrooms are learner-centered and do not generally rely on teacher intervention. My goal was, therefore, to add a ‘real-life’ interactive element to the classroom task of listening to a given aural text. In other words, to do collaborative listening in groups; students listen to a text, and they must also listen to each other discussing what they were able to grasp from the text. The following is an account of how I approached that goal, and what happened.

The Nature of Listening and Listening Classes

Listening takes place in all kinds of daily contexts, and people listen for a variety of motives, such as to receive information or as

part of social interaction. Classroom listening activities, however, often fall short of mirroring what happens in the outside world. Field (2008) observed several issues to be considered, first among which is that classes are necessarily teacher-centered (p. 38). Traditionally, it is the teacher who orchestrates a listening activity by pushing the CD player's start, pause and stop buttons. When it comes to being called on to answer comprehension questions, students tend to shirk and avert their eyes. They are unsure if they have a complete understanding, at either the linguistic or the discourse level. It is safe to say that any frustrated teacher desperate to move a class along, has at one time or another called on a bright student—usually the highest proficiency student—who is known to be able to reliably answer the question. This avoids the risk of having a lower-proficiency student lose face by getting the answer wrong. Often from this one answer solicited from one outstanding student, the teacher moves on, outwardly satisfied that the entire class understood the listening text (Field, 2008). The rest of the class can remain silent and not participate. An honest instructor must reflect on whether this serves the class, or demotivates those who struggle to keep afloat. At the learner level, each student listener may need clarification, simplification, or a complete replay of the listening track. Or maybe they need the safety of working out meaning with classmates without having fear of admitting lack of understanding or catching what was just played to the class. This is where I maintain the CLT / learner-centered set up shows its strength.

Listening is also a highly personal and individual activity. At a basic level, listening requires involvement—or intentionality—in

what is being said; that is, it requires the purposeful and conscious attention of the listener (Chaffe, 2000). Teachers cannot force participation, and students cannot reasonably be expected to be completely focused on listening tracks. Even in the real world, the most attentive people tune out sometimes. Meanwhile the CD track goes on and does not notice the lone student inattentively looking out the window or drawing squiggles on the practice sheet. A live conversation is more forgiving. For example, a distracted person could apologize for not taking in what was said and ask for repetition.

Further, listening abilities vary by past education, experience and ability. In the EFL context, some learners simply have had more exposure to L2 listening than others. Just as some students have greater reading vocabularies, so too do they differ in listening vocabulary and exposure to familiar chunks of language. According to ability or difficulty of the text, one student might be required to decode a listening text from the bottom-up, parsing it at the word level and putting grammatical items into chunks so it makes sense at the overall discourse level. For example, after listening to a text about the dangers of global warming, a low proficiency learner might only be able to pick out a list of content words: *emissions, cars, atmosphere, planet, sea level, warming, droughts*, etc. However, they may have little understanding of the overall meaning of the listening passage. Then the listener does a second parsing attaching content words to function words such as particles, prepositions, *be*-verbs or conjunctions (Martin-Loeches et al., 2009).

Familiarity differs, too. For some, they have sense of, 'I have

seen this movie before.’ Those who routinely read the newspaper or have knowledge of science, might grapple with a listening passage from the top down. That is, they already have an image of the problem—literally they might recall a graphic image seen on the news or a TV documentary—and can easily digest the detail at the word level and go for the overall meaning: *emissions from cars and factories are warming the planet’s atmosphere, causing droughts and melting Arctic sea ice and raising sea levels*. The listening merely supplements what, for example, they heard in the news or were told by a science teacher. This can be understood by considering young children and wiser adults, the latter of whom have lived and learned from daily experiences have countless schema available to guide them through daily life without re-learning it all over again every day. As adults, we access memories closely related to the new experience as a way to fill in the entire picture of what new information we are hearing (Anderson, 1977). Similarly, students with adequate background information, schemata or frame, can infer the meaning of a listening passage with only partial comprehension, without trying to understand every last phoneme and syllable. They selectively choose the most important information and make inferences based on what they already know. New information acquired through listening to the passage would be added to that schema. Tannen (1979) referred to these as ‘structures of expectation’ (1979). Listening to a text, more proficient listeners—in what Cicourel (1999) called the *et cetera* principle—may skip over details judged to be unnecessary and wait for later utterances where they forecast the speaker is heading. This filtering process helps determine what is meant or

what information is most vital.

The abilities of listeners are likely to vary widely in an EFL classroom, and activities should attempt to accommodate students' individual strengths and weaknesses. Instead of placing the burden on the teacher to focus on and tend to each learner and her needs, a communicative approach to listening attempts to let the learners work out meaning in groups. It allows them listen collaboratively and figure out the language that they *don't* know by using the language that they *do* know. In this way, they achieve not only listening to an aural text, but also listening to each other.

Pragmatic Processing: Listening for What was Not Said

Listeners activate social structures employing their own pragmatic processing to determine the deeper meaning of a listening text. The following classroom anecdote, one of many such, illustrates this phenomenon. The listening text was a dramatized conversation between a male giving music lessons to a novice female friend. To me, the classroom teacher, the content was straight forward and all students would *naturally* reach the same conclusion. That was not the case.

Following the listening and activities, I created and gave my students a post-listening quiz that focused on levels of linguistic processing and comprehension. One question asked the students to speculate and make inferences from the conversation as to whether the woman would be likely to improve or not and, more importantly, to explain their answer. Again, the answer seemed obvious to me.

However, using various clues, students came back with several

answers with varying degrees of yes, no, or maybe—all of which were plausible. Many students used their own childhood piano lesson experience and speculated that the woman would ‘do her best.’ Others insisted that she was not serious, she was hopelessly tone deaf, and would give up. Some focused on the words of encouragement from the teacher and answered that the man was kind and would motivate her to succeed. Still others thought the drama had nothing to do with music lessons at all. Rather, the pair had a mutual crush on each other, and were using the lessons as a reason to be together as a kind of romantic date. With what I had thought of as a run-of-the-mill question to test comprehension, I actually, inadvertently tapped into unexpected student insights. This and several other surprising student responses to listening texts showed me how much students will employ their pragmatic processing abilities when listening.

When students listen to an aural text, they may all hear the same auditory signal, but we must not fail to consider the human, social and aesthetic aspects of getting meaning out of utterances (Johnson, 2007). In particular, an interactive group work element elicits the creativity of meaning that students generate from what they hear, and doubles the kind of listening that goes on in the listening classroom: listening to an aural text, and then listening to—and speaking with—other classmates and the teacher. Below I describe how I implemented a classroom activity that incorporates both a traditional listening activity into a group work exercise.

The Listening Text and Activity

The listening passage at the focus of this paper was given to a

large class of just over 50 students. It was a purely listening task with no transcript provided to the students until the very end of the lesson. It took place early in the semester when I could expect that student motivation and attention levels would be higher than other times. For this experiment, the listening passage I chose was a podcast from the National Public Radio series American Radioworks, titled “The Science of Smart,” which aired in summer 2014. The recording plays for 2 minutes and 2 seconds and contains 301 words, or approximately 150 words per minute. According to River’s (1981) delivery rate scale (cited in Richards, 1983), this is a moderately slow speed—below average—when compared to average conversational spoken language. Because most parts are carefully scripted and edited, the listener is likely to feel it is packed with a large volume of information.

A transcript of the 2-minute program is listed in Appendix 1, and is key for understanding the analysis presented here. This news documentary was reported by a male and a female reporter who drove together to an elementary school in the western U.S. state of Utah to observe an experiment in language immersion. Here, children received half their lessons—even math and other content subjects—entirely in Mandarin, and the other half in English. I chose this radio program because it was authentic and perhaps of interest to English language majors. The speech was natural speed and though the lead up to the main part of the story was journalistic abstract background information, the last part was rich in vivid detail. The beginning of the passage contained challenging vocabulary and syntax that I knew ahead of time to be beyond the students’ ability to grasp—even partly—at first

listen. The second half which took place in an elementary school classroom which all the first-year university students, on the other hand, seemed easier.

The reporters summarized the cultural-political scene of the area, which any reasonably informed American could be expected to digest. However, even though they were English majors, my first-year Japanese university students clearly lacked culturally specific background knowledge to fully understand what was being said. Even native English speakers from outside the United States, say from England or Australia, who lacked detailed knowledge of American history and the current political climate might not have been able to grasp the finer points of the following excerpt.

...We are driving to a school in the heart of a region known as “Utah’s Dixie.” It was settled in the 1860’s when 300 Mormon families moved here to grow cotton. This area is about 95% white, very Mormon, very politically conservative....

The reference to Dixie, or the confederate Deep South of the United States implies deeply conservative ways of thinking, which may include resistance to non-English education, or even education generally. This would be useful information to the American audience. It also refers to the history of cotton growing in the American South, a main source of economic activity in the Dixie of old in the 19th Century. The Mandarin immersion program, then, stands in counterpoint to the conservative setting in which it exists. Although these university-age Japanese listeners do not have the background knowledge to appreciate this reference, it is

sufficient that they can identify with the elementary classroom as well as the foreign language classroom setting in the second half of the listening.

“...Red paper lanterns hang above every little desk. There is a map of China on the wall, and a huge Chinese flag with its five golden stars on a red field hangs by the door.

Miss. Sun switches over to the day’s math lesson: addition and subtraction. She starts dotting circles on a whiteboard. One-two-three-four. ‘How many total circles are there?’ she asks a quiet girl called Lilly...”

In order to understand what listeners were able to process from the aural text, I set up the activity as follows. The entire passage was played once and students just listened. Students were not allowed to discuss the meaning with classmates—yet. Immediately following, I handed out a cloze exercise fill-in sheet and played the first five sentences one at a time. Students were given a few seconds to write the words they heard (see figure 1, below). At a glance, many had written up to half. After, I instructed them to flip over the paper and gave two minutes write as much as they could about the entire listening passage. Again, the students were not yet given an opportunity to discuss the passage with their classmates. The point of this exercise was to get an indication of students’ ability to process listening from the bottom-up word level, as well as from the top-down discourse level, after only one exposure to the text.

From numbers 1 through 5a. a blank line was provided for each word, 5b. was one long line to be filled in freely.

Figure 1: Dictation Exercise

- Man: 1. We are in uhm... where are we?
Woman: 2. Well, we are in southern Utah.
Man: 3. Yeah, we are in southern Utah
4. ...driving underneath these red rock bluffs.
5a. We are driving to a school
5b. in the heart of a region known as "Utah's Dixie."

Below are samples of what four students answered. These four examples are sufficient to illustrate the nature of the student reconstruction of input. Although it is hard to know what is going on in each student's mind, this reconstruction process offers the teacher a glimpse at student strengths and weaknesses in terms of listening at a phonological, lexical and grammatical level. The answers given by student 4 are included here as to show an example of a high proficiency student who on this day lacked intentionality to listen. She was noticeably distracted.

Figure 2: Representative samples of student responses

Student 1

1. We are in
2. Well, we are in seven...
3. Yeah,

4. driving
- 5a. We are driving to the school
- 5b. In a _____ origin _____

Student 2

1. We are in a …why are we?
2. Well, we are sudden near top
3. Yeah, we are sudden near top
4. …driving in a read* _____ rocks
- 5a. We are driving to a school
- 5b. In hard origin you told diesy.

Student 3

1. We are in a …what will be?
2. Well, we are suddenly to talk
3. Yeah, you suddenly talked _____
4. …
- 5a. We are driving to the school
- 5b. In a heart of a reason in you a d—

Student 4

1. We are
2. Well
3. Yes
4. …driving
- 5a. We are driving _____ a school.
- 5b.

Initially, I supposed that line 5a, ‘We are driving to a school,’ would be the easiest to catch. The fact that the reporters went to a school was clear. The ‘we are’ structure is repeated, and the present progressive suggests real-time reporting, like a live broadcast. The other content which followed was more difficult. Nearly all students were able to identify the main function words: *we are driving ...school*. Figure 3 (below) lists the frequency of correct words in all students’ answers.

We⁺ 27 ⁺	are⁺ 27 ⁺	in...⁺ 18 ⁺	uhm,⁺ 4 ⁺	where⁺ 25 ⁺	are⁺ 29 ⁺	we?⁺ 24 ⁺			
Well[Ⓢ] 46 [Ⓢ]	we[Ⓢ] 32 [Ⓢ]	are⁺ 27 ⁺	in[Ⓢ] 5 [Ⓢ]	southern⁺ 1 ⁺	Utah⁺ 2 ⁺				
Yeah[Ⓢ] 44/42 [Ⓢ]	we⁺ 23 ⁺	are⁺ 21 ⁺	in[Ⓢ] 5 [Ⓢ]	southern⁺ 1 ⁺	Utah⁺ 2 ⁺				
Driving[Ⓢ] 48 [Ⓢ]	underneath⁺ 0* 2 ⁺	these⁺ 0 ⁺	red⁺ 11 ⁺	rock⁺ 1 ⁺	bluffs⁺ 0 ⁺				
We[Ⓢ] 47 [Ⓢ]	are[Ⓢ] 48 [Ⓢ]	driving[Ⓢ] 50 [Ⓢ]	to[Ⓢ] 34 [Ⓢ]	a⁺ 18 ⁺	school[Ⓢ] 50 [Ⓢ]				
in[Ⓢ] 44 [Ⓢ]	a⁺ 28 ⁺	heart⁺ 11 ⁺	of[Ⓢ] 7 [Ⓢ]	a⁺ 2 ⁺	region⁺ 0 ⁺	known⁺ 0 ⁺	as⁺ 0 ⁺	Utah's⁺ 0 ⁺	Dixie⁺ 21* ⁺

Figure 3: Whole-Class (50 students) breakdown of correct answers by individual word (*Darker shades indicate a high number of students who correctly heard and wrote the word on the cloze quiz.)

It should be noted that this type of listening exercise—bottom-up processing, or listening for specific words and trying to reconstruct phrases—is typical of traditional EFL listening classes. What I did afterward, however, was a little bit different. Rather than supplying the students with correct answers, I had them listen at the word-level again, but this time, they discussed what they heard with each other. I believe it is this top-down processing, the attempt to reconstruct overall meaning, and of struggling to understand what was heard, that better matches the act of listening in the real world.

Parallel Analysis and Mishearings

For listeners, in the process of overall understanding, utterances are put into a short-term memory loop, or working memory. When initial comprehension fails, listeners compensate by using other clues to infer and make the best possible guess as to what was said and what was meant. Johnson and Laird (1984) described how parallel analysis works: listeners will compute competing possible versions, and will tend to stick with one version until its meaning breaks down and needs to be revised.

Figure 4 below lists mishearings and mistaken interpretations of “southern Utah.” Many students interpreted the [s + ah] sound with a following [t] sound as a combination of ‘sudden’ + ‘talk.’ When asked, many students reported that their responses seemed to fit with the informal chit-chat nature of the conversation in the radio program.

Figure 4: Mishearings of “Southern Utah”

suddenly talked (3)	new talk
suddenly you talked (2)	you will have some talk
sudden you talked (7)	you will seven you tight
sudden new talk	seven you talk
sudden new	suddenly your turn
sudden near top	new town / some new town (4)
suddenly new top	in town
suddenly tired	several new raps
suddenly you	seven you tom (?)
sudden you told	somewhere
suddenly	a new tail
seven new	

The description of red rock bluffs also presented troubles. Very few students provided the correct words in the dictation exercise. Curiously, three students substituted ‘blood’ for ‘bluff.’ Aitchenson (2003), in her treatment of what she calls word webs, identified several ways in which words are associated. In this case, it is collocation, or words which naturally go together. One student heard the word ‘heart’ in the first listening and took a guess. Clearly one of her schema was activated and a collocation association was formed. She had associated a heart with being red. Blood, also, may be associated with red.

It is important to note that this was only the first listening of a difficult text. Still, in a class of 50, only four students wrote nothing at all. Most wrote lists of the words they heard and jotted

down ideas The diversity of language heard is apparent. In total (Figure 5. below), the class as a whole taken together was able to list all the main content words, enough to fit the main puzzle pieces into an overall picture of what was being said.

Figure 5: Sampling of student responses after one listen: “*Write as much as you can in two minutes.*”

- a. “School. Teacher is teaching to children. The girl counts the number of circles.”
- b. “In American elementary school, sing, they move by car.”
- c. “This is about school. More and more people move to America. So, three years ago a elementary schools teach—”
- d. “Driving to school. Family. Quickly cheaply …overnight …elementary—mountains. Teachers. Children sing. A lesson at a school, .. write something (numbers?) on a white board.”
- e. “School. I listened child’s song. I think they are interesting.”
- f. “Chinese 5 years old. In elementary school children learns Chinese from— ”
- g. “In a school, children were singing. One, two, three, four”
- h. “About snow mountain.”
- j. “. . . quickly, cheaply, overnight. School like any other. Shape hands, little secret …red paper…”
- k. “Somebody moved by car to a place named “dixy.” . . . At snow mountain”
- l. “Color of their hair, history of the town.”

- m. "First is about experiment: car. But the story changes about children."
- n. "They go to school. Listening of American history a lot of language singing 1, 2, 3, 4 16 true great, great, really great"
- o. "I can't listen all of the things. But I can hear driving the car, kids are singing songs, they are at school, in 1860, snow mountain, and China."

Where in the first listening students were not allowed to share answers, in the next activity, the communicative part of the class (described below), each student shared what they thought they heard with other students, and with still more students after each listening. Their attention became more finely focused on items suggested from classmates and partners. After several more listenings and prompts from the teacher, the snowball slowly rolling downhill grew in size, the L2 conversation became livelier and in 30 minutes the entirety of the listening began to take form in their minds and understanding of the entire class. Although the final results presented above show that this understanding did not extend to the social-cultural background of Utah, it was enough that a majority demonstrated that they absorbed the majority of the main words and ideas.

Communicative Element in the Listening Exercise

Figure 5 (above) shows that almost everyone could hear a word, get an image or form an impression. The remainder of the class time was taken re-playing the radio program several times.

Students were put into groups of three or pairs, the program was played again and again. Students took notes what they heard, and based on what they had written before discussed it with their group partners. After a few minutes, group members were rotated and changed, and the discussion began again. The instructor provided prompts and clues as how to dig deeper into the listening. Students were not provided with a transcript. On a blank piece of paper, they filled in their own webs and clusters and maps of terms freely. No smartphones were allowed for doing web searches, and in principle L1 (Japanese) was not allowed (Admittedly, this is a hard rule to enforce comprehensively, although as the school term progresses and the students see the point of the rule and the exercise, L1 gradually drops off). I supplemented their discussion with a brief history and cultural lesson, including a rendition of the tune, “Going Down to Dixie.” Also, I directly explained particularly low-frequency words that the students were not likely to have encountered previously.

Beyond this, however, how learners chose to fit pieces of the listening text puzzle together, I left it to them. Particularly helpful were the frequent group changes which allowed students of various levels of listening abilities to mingle, to glean words and ideas from each other. All the while, they had to interact with each other in English, and in so doing they must listen to one another and understand one another. Through this classroom setup, by necessity and a feeling of responsibility to participate, my students are acutely engaged with trying to make sense of a listening text at a bottom-up (word and phrase) level and a top-down (overall meaning) discourse level. All the while using the

English they know with their classmates to grapple with the English they do not. In following listenings, students more easily attended to the words or ideas that previously did not understand.

Student comment: 教科書の内容を何回も理解しているか確認してくれて、みんなで確認できてよかった (We confirmed the meaning of the textbook content over and over, checking the meaning together worked out good.)

This classroom design turned a passive listening activity into an active one, where the 'correct' meaning of the listening passage was up for debate, and had to be acquired in a struggle to listen, and then communicate using L2.

Final Evaluation

The above activity, including individual and group work listening, lasted approximately 60 minutes, after which a final two-part comprehension test / evaluation was conducted. The two sections were: a.) a cloze test where each student had to fill in the words they heard; and b.) a short answer comprehension test in which students were required to answer questions about the content.

As for the second section, all 50 students wrote a true and accurate description of the children which matched the listening text—including one student who drew a picture of a boy with a crew-cut and a smiling girl missing her two front teeth, sporting bows in her hair. However, as expected, for the question about the political and social make up of southern Utah, only twenty-six students were given credit for a correct answer, and fourteen left

it blank. Many were left confused about the Dixie analogy. This could have been because of the difficulty of the metaphor, or the result of time constraints in hashing out the meaning. Only a short amount of time could be devoted to reaching an understanding of this listening item.

Figure 6: Part 1: Selected cloze exercise answers

- | | | |
|----|-------------------------------|--|
| a. | southern Utah | |
| | “Utah” | 40 answers had the state name correct |
| | “southern Utah”: | 13 *actual correct answer |
| | “State of Utah” | 4 |
| b. | “Utah’s Dixie” | 45 (phonetically close, spelling excused) |
| | “~Dixie” | 3 |
| | | *(first listen: 21 correct) |
| c. | “grow cotton” | |
| | “grow cotton” | 13 |
| | “grow up” | 3 |
| d. | Mandarin | 34 |
| e. | blonde | 39 |
| f. | map of China | 49 |
| g. | “jumping tiger, a little cat” | 37 (full credit); 13 (half credit—
one element wrong) |

Part 2. Written Comprehension Answers

a. *Explain what the children looked like.*

Crew cut, braided, they have pink and purple gom. (27 similar answers)

Crew cut, almost blonde

Boys and girls look cheerful.

Blonde and full cut, ...put purple hair accessory.

(picture of hair styles)

Boys: their hair are very short. Similar to Japanese boys who play baseball.

They have purple and pink bows. They have golden hair.

Blond hair, missing teeth, braids, pink and purple accessory.

No hair. Blond hair.

b. *Socially and politically, what kind of place is it?*

95% white.

It's not a safe place.

It's that place where Chinese import.

Cheaply.

People who live in the place are mostly Mormon, this is a place of Mormons.

There are white 95%.

90% is white people. Many families moved to grow cotton.

There are many Chinese.

It is dangerous. Parents drive their children to Dixie by car.

Mormon moved to this area, and --

It is Mormen (spelling).

There are many people who speak only Chinese.

They are almost immigrants. They move there. So, they can't speak the language fluently.

There is a Dixie.

Politically conservative place.

It is a Chinese Children's school.

There are many white. It's a complex place.

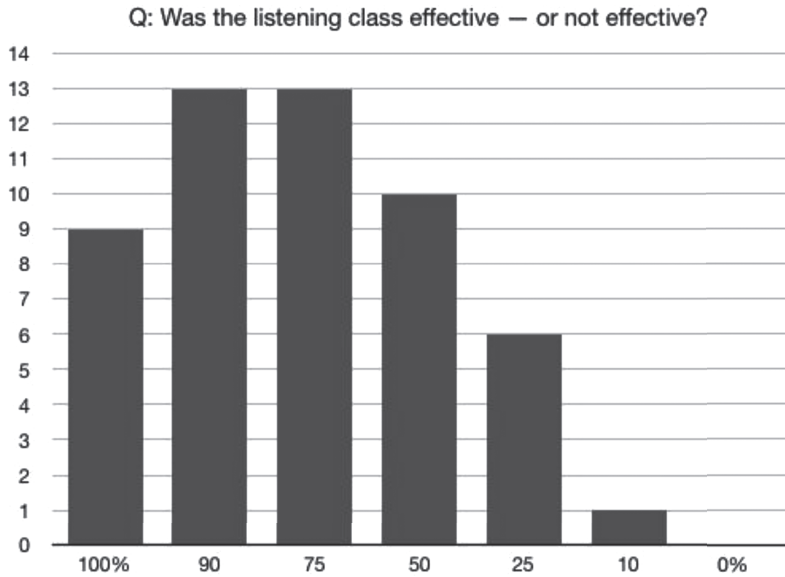
There are a lot of kinds people.

(*repetitious answers are not included; 14 students left this question blank.)

Effectiveness

The purpose of this study is about teaching method, employing a learner-centered CLT format in a listening skills class, and teacher observations of the learning process. It is beyond the scope of this paper to include the extensive related action research into learner attitudes. However, I would be remiss not to give some voice to the learners themselves. Using both quantitative and qualitative survey methods, I have been keeping track of student reaction and opinions to the lesson for the past five years. Seven point Likert scale responses concerning overall effectiveness of the lesson is shown below in Figure 7. The implication in the question is clearly directed at the simple format with no textbook during in-class listening, followed by discussion with classmates. With small variations, the results have been stable through the years. About two-thirds found the lesson and activities to be effective.

Figure 7:



Conclusion

“I can’t understand first listening because I am bad at listening skills. But this class has discussion time. I can understand details.”

“I can focus in this class. . . . I feel forced to focus in this class. That was good for me.”—(student comments from an end-of-semester action research)

In the classroom, I continually question myself: what am I teaching here? As noted earlier in this paper by Field (2008), one easy way

would be a teacher-centered classroom lesson which relies partly on students reading from a text. Having started with that method, what I have outlined in this study is more focused on listening and communication about what was heard. This latter model offers a better education experience and a more effective one. I did my best to eliminate all distractions and carried out the in-class activities allowing the students only a blank worksheet and a pencil. All other objects are put away out of sight. Further, I wished to address the nature of traditional listening activities—specifically, the act of passively listening to a CD, filling in blanks, and then being supplied with correct answers. That may be one form of teaching listening—akin to standardized test study, but it does not approach the element of listening that goes on in face-to-face interaction. Although classroom listening exercises can never replicate perfectly a real-world need to be able to comprehend, the design outlined here comes closer to that real-world ideal than traditional, passive exercises. It is part of the CLT ideal that seeing a real-world applicability feeds into higher motivation towards foreign language study (Finocchiaro and Brumfit, 1983). As the student comment quoted at the top of this section alludes, the classroom setup described within tentatively lives up to Littlewood's (1981) idea that classroom exercises that follow the Communicative Approach should reflect real world value—the need to communicate, or in this case the need to understand and work out meaning with other people.

This is a preliminary report, and a future closer examination of how students perceive this classroom exercise improved their listening skills would be helpful. A more thorough survey of how

students perceive their engagement level in this listening class setup, as opposed to other more traditional setups they may have encountered in past, might be particularly revealing. As I have observed, knowing that they were responsible for picking up a nugget from the listening pile in order to explain and share with their classmates, students had greater incentive to maintain their intentionality towards the listening text and make the exercise a more effective learning experience.

Bio data

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Appendix 1: Radio Documentary Transcript

(author's italics indicate section transcribed by students)

Man: *We are in uhm... where are we?*

Woman: *Well, we are in southern Utah.*

Man: *Yeah, we are in southern Utah... driving under these red rock bluffs. We are driving to a school in the heart of a region known as "Utah's Dixie."* It was settled in the 1860's when 300 Mormon families moved here to grow cotton. This area is about 95% white, very Mormon, very politically conservative.

Woman: And it is one node in a vast experiment to see whether a state can quickly, cheaply and effectively create tens of thousands of fluent foreign language speakers, virtually overnight.

Man: Here we are at the school.

Woman: This is Arrowhead Elementary. It's a low brick building under snow-capped mountains. Three years ago, it was a school like any other. But today, half of Arrowhead students spend much of their time in classes taught entirely in Mandarin.

(Children singing)

Woman: About thirty first-graders sit cross-legged in front of teacher Jin Sun singing and forming shapes with their hands to match the words: a jumping tiger, a little cat. The kids are mostly blonde. The boys have crew cuts. The girls are wearing a lot of glitter and sequins, and have their hair in neat braids tied with pink and purple bows. Lots of the kids are missing their front teeth.

(Children singing)

Man: Red paper lanterns hang above every little desk. There is a map of China on the wall, and a huge Chinese flag with its five golden stars on a red field hangs by the door.

Woman: Miss. Sun switches over to the day's math lesson: addition and subtraction. She starts dotting circles on a whiteboard. One-two-three-four. 'How many total circles are there?' she asks a quiet girl called Lilly.

'Sixteen,' says Lilly.

'Is that right?' Miss Sun asks.

'Right!' the kids yell.

And she chants, 'Great! Great! You're really great!'