

## The Construct of Listening for Testing

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### I. Theoretical Background and Rationale

The Ministry of Education in Japan revised the Course of Study for Lower and Secondary Schools in 1989 by stating that one of the most important targets of English teaching in junior and senior high schools in Japan is to enhance students' oral communication ability – listening and speaking skills. Those English teachers who have been active in finding relevant listening texts and innovative in-class listening activities have had to deal with an even greater difficulty than the teaching of listening. What vexes these teachers is how to measure students' listening ability. As the test is usually based on what has been taught in classroom situations, there has been an increasing demand for the assessment of students' English listening skills. Teachers have come to realize that there are more complexities in the assessment of listening, such as the construct of listening. They are not always sure what the components of listening are; accordingly, it is sometimes difficult to explain what the test scores mean even if one student receives a high mark on a picture-oriented test.

When constructing a language proficiency test, whether it be a listening test or not, we have to be able to justify its validity, reliability and prac-

ticality. Among these, validity is the most crucial factor for test construction because it concerns whether the test truly examines what it is supposed to measure. How can we determine what the test is supposed to measure? In other words, how can the components of language proficiency be decided upon?

Approaching the definition of listening theoretically is one way to outline the components of language proficiency. Buck (1994) claims that during test construction, a number of theoretical decisions must be made. Weir (1993) also maintains that tests should be theory driven. Thus, the theoretical part of test construction is an obvious starting point.

The next step is to rely on the ideas of experienced teachers and scholars. The reason for this reliance on experience in the process of test construction is because these teachers know best the students' needs and goals, as well as the practical limitations of each institution they work for. The value of approaching testing with a framework is that it makes apparent what needs to be tested and what does not. It will clarify the features of real-life activity that teachers should strive to build into language proficiency tests (Weir 1993).

## **II. Purpose of Research**

This study is composed around three main purposes. The first purpose is to highlight the components of listening to make a practical test which will assess Japanese students' English listening ability. Information will be provided from three viewpoints: 1) the nature of listening, 2) the linguistic components of listening and 3) the test format of listening. The second purpose is to investigate how much college teachers and high school teachers agree on the construct of listening. The final purpose of the research is to show

how the new construct of listening is reflected in an actual listening test, such as the Japan Association of College English Teachers (JACET) Basic English Listening Comprehension Test.

### **III. Research Design and Method**

Seventy-four experienced English teachers (forty-four college teachers and thirty high school teachers out of 200) responded to a listening construct questionnaire consisting of sixteen items (See Appendix A). The teachers rated these items on a four-point scale according to the degree of importance to listening comprehension.

#### **Establishment of Research Instrument**

By reviewing the literature on the theory of listening ( Bachman 1990; Heaton 1988; Weir 1993; Henning and Cascallar 1992; Richards 1983; Wolvin and Coakley 1985; Brown 1977; Handel 1989; Brown 1994) , interviewing colleagues and reflecting on my own teaching experience, I have established the following three viewpoints toward the construct of the components of listening;

- 1) the nature of listening (prototype listening)
- 2) the linguistic components of listening
- 3) the format of listening tests (including text types, response tasks and evaluation of the task performance)

#### **1. Nature of Listening**

The nature of listening can be presented by mentioning the five main points of listening. However, we must also consider that listening compre-

hension occurs within a student's mind and that the only way to test ability is to have students actually do something and then assess the thought process that produced the results. The five main points of listening are as follows:

- 1) The ability to understand what we hear.

From the testing viewpoint, we must take into account the type of text and the level of difficulty to decide what we want students to listen to.

- 2) The ability to connect what we hear to what we know.

This is related to schema theory. We use our background knowledge to understand what we hear.

- 3) The ability to put new information into a script we are familiar with.

This is similar to schema theory. We use our previous experience or knowledge of a similar situation to understand the situation we encounter through listening.

- 4) The ability to relate the information to what we already know.

The point here is to try to relate the information to a previous similar experience.

- 5) The ability to use linguistic knowledge (sound, grammar, vocabulary, discourse) to understand what we hear or even what we miss at an intra-sentence level, inter-sentence level or large context level. While this ability has been a typical idea of listening, the addition of discourse is a relatively new element.

Note: Points 2) to 4) claim more or less the same idea, which is the utilization of background information (i.e. the script, the schema) to understand what we hear.

## **2. Linguistic Components of Listening**

When we think about how much we understand from what we hear, the four linguistic elements of listening (sound, grammar, vocabulary, discourse) will automatically arise because we are dealing with a language test. They are indispensable and they should be paid special attention to for test construction.

## **3. Perspectives of the Developing a Listening Test**

Having considered all of the information from the nature of listening and the linguistic components of listening, I proposed a new construct for the present listening test being developed.

- 1) ability to cope with noise
- 2) ability to compensate for what is missed
- 3) ability to process what is heard in real time
- 4) ability to grasp the context
- 5) ability to predict what the speaker is likely to say next
- 6) ability to understand English at a discourse level
- 7) ability to distinguish sounds (individual sounds)
- 8) ability to distinguish sounds(reduced forms, or weak forms)
- 9) ability to distinguish sounds (intonation, stress and rhythm)
- 10) ability to use vocabulary knowledge
- 11) ability to use grammar knowledge
- 12) ability to utilize schemata (background knowledge)
- 13) ability to understand sentence level English
- 14) ability to understand English in social settings
- 15) ability to deal with academic material
- 16) ability to deal with authentic English

#### **4. Format (Text, Response Task, Evaluation of the Task Performance)**

Format, in a broader sense, includes text types, response tasks and the evaluation of the task performance, and the three of these are closely inter-related. Text types of the test material which we have students listen to should be varied as follows:

- 1) public announcements
- 2) telephone messages
- 3) extracts from news media (radio news; TV news)
- 4) directions or instructions ( recipes)
- 5) dialogues (face to face; telephone)
- 6) interviews
- 7) songs
- 8) short speeches
- 9) lectures

Response tasks through which students perform their understanding of the material are as follows:

- 1) multiple choice
- 2) true/false
- 3) cloze test
- 4) dictation

In dealing with text and response tasks, we must take into consideration the authenticity of the material and the performance of the students. To do this, we must take into account the crucial features of authenticity. The following are some possibilities:

- 1) English should be meaningful.
- 2) English should be spoken with natural speed (with natural intonation and rhythm).
- 3) Context should be self-evident and close to natural. Test takers

should be able to share the same experience.

- 4) Authenticity at the college level may be different from that of high school.

Evaluation of the task performance is closely connected with practicality and reliability of the test.

### Analysis Procedure

Descriptive statistics of the questionnaire data were employed to show how much teachers agree in their rating, while factor analysis was adopted to obtain the categorized components of those 16 items. Also, a comparative analysis was conducted between the components of the new construct of listening and the test format of the JACET listening test.

## IV. Results and Discussion

### Overall Tendency of Rating

**Table 1 Total (college and high school) mean scores**

Item	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16
Mean	2.30	2.92	3.34	3.58	3.04	3.08	2.74	2.92	3.2	3.31	2.81	2.95	3.15	2.7	2.65	3.18
S.D.	0.86	0.82	0.72	0.70	0.85	0.82	0.81	0.85	0.82	0.70	0.75	0.73	0.69	0.73	0.85	0.79

Table 1 demonstrates the overall tendency of teachers' rating in each item. Of the 16 items, all but item 1 received a score above the median (2.5) on the 1-4 point scale. This means that all the teachers consider each item rather important. In particular, items 3, 4 and 10 had scores above 3.3. The content of those outstanding items are as follows:

Item 1: ability to cope with noise

Item 3: ability to process what is heard in real time

Item 4: ability to grasp the context

Item 10: ability to use vocabulary knowledge

### Comparison Between College Teachers and High School Teachers

**Table 2 Comparison Between College Teachers and High School Teachers**

item	Mean		SD		t
	CT	HST	CT	HST	
1.	2.30	2.13	0.85	0.90	0.79
2.	3.11	2.63	0.75	0.85	2.56*
3.	3.36	3.30	0.72	0.75	0.37
4.	3.64	3.50	0.75	0.63	0.82
5.	3.11	2.93	0.78	0.94	0.89
6.	3.23	2.87	0.83	0.78	1.88
7.	2.71	2.80	0.88	0.71	-0.49
8.	2.93	2.90	0.90	0.80	0.16
9.	3.01	3.40	0.79	0.86	-1.72
10.	3.32	3.30	0.71	0.70	0.11
11.	2.82	2.80	0.79	0.71	0.10
12.	3.01	2.73	0.71	0.74	2.09*
13.	3.14	3.17	0.70	0.70	-0.18
14.	2.66	2.77	0.65	0.86	-0.62
15.	2.75	2.50	0.81	0.90	1.25
16.	3.27	3.03	0.82	0.77	1.27

N.B. CT: College Teachers (n=44)

HST: High School Teachers (n=30)

d.f.=72

\* p<.05

Table 2 shows that with the t-test there is not a significant difference in the mean scores between CT and HST, except for items 2 and 12.

item 2: ability to compensate for what is missed

item 12: ability to utilize schemata (background knowledge)



**Item 2**

In high school, rather than compensating for what is missed, students are supposed to grasp what the general outline is from what they are able to catch. In general, this ability is much too demanding for most high school students.

**Item 12**

This ability is much too demanding for most high school students. Table 2 also suggests that items 3,4, and 10 are important elements. (Mean scores for both groups over 3.30).

item 3: ability to process what is heard in real time

item 4: ability to grasp the context

item 10: ability to use vocabulary knowledge

For each group, speed, context, and vocabulary seem to be the most important. With regard to the speed factor, a test should be conducted in a relatively natural speed. The context grasping ability could be represented by the situation guessing items on the TOEFL TEST (e.g. where is this conversation most likely to happen?). Finally, in the case of the listening test, the importance of sound vocabulary should be stressed.

Table 2 also indicates a tendency for college teachers to rate most of these 16 items a little higher than high school teachers, (exceptions being items 7, 9, 13 and 14).

One reason might be that college teachers used the high end of the 4 point scale while high school teachers used the middle part of the scale as the basis for their grading.

Another reason might be that, while the order of importance is almost the same in each level (high school and college), the degree of importance would be different. Therefore, when college teachers make a test for high

school students, they can use the same list of items. However, they must take into account the degree of importance and construct the test accordingly.

Still another reason might be that the college teachers' understanding of each item was a little higher than that of high school teachers simply because high school teachers are not as familiar with some of technical terms used.

Unlike the general tendency of rating mentioned above (college teachers' scorings being generally higher than those of high school teachers), four items (7, 9, 13 and 14) demonstrate the reverse phenomena, with high school teachers giving more points than college teachers.

In particular, Item 9 shows an interesting phenomenon. High school teachers think that at the high school level, supra-segmental features such as stress, rhythm and intonation are very important for assessing students' listening ability.

### **Results of Factor Analysis**

Since there was an overall agreement between college teachers and high school teachers in their rating of the analyzed items (with two minor exceptions), we can use the total score (combination of college teachers' scores and high school teachers' scores ) to run a factor analysis. A four-factor structure seems to be reasonable to explain the listening ability.

**Table 3 Four-Factor Structure of the Total (College Teachers and High School Teachers)**

item	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
1	-0.034	0.032	0.656	0.169
2	-0.296	0.421	0.580	-0.032
3	0.295	0.002	0.841	-0.022
4	0.163	0.558	0.253	-0.136
5	-0.076	0.736	0.201	-0.125
6	0.169	0.530	0.256	0.344
7	0.731	0.231	0.038	-0.178
8	0.599	0.478	-0.067	-0.188
9	0.603	0.461	-0.142	-0.051
10	0.659	0.044	0.259	-0.076
11	0.735	-0.040	-0.085	0.199
12	0.123	0.639	-0.170	0.243
13	0.379	-0.245	0.275	0.199
14	-0.086	-0.027	0.032	0.762
15	-0.011	0.177	0.102	0.750
16	0.052	0.239	-0.029	0.090
Percent of Total variance explained	16.485	14.797	11.633	9.671

**1. Factor 1 Intra-Sentence Listening Ability (Basic Listening Ability)**

item 7: ability to distinguish sounds (individual sounds)

item 8: ability to distinguish sounds (reduced forms/ weak forms)

item 9: ability to distinguish sounds (intonation, stress, rhythm)

item 10: ability to use vocabulary knowledge

item 11: ability to use grammar knowledge

item 13: ability to understand sentence-level English

We will name this factor Intra-Sentence Listening Ability. This ability deals with students' listening ability at a sentence level. The students utilize basic phonological, lexical and syntactical knowledge to comprehend what has been heard. Mostly, students work on sound discrimination at this sentence level.

**2. Factor 2 (Progressive Prediction Ability)**

item 4: ability to grasp the context

item 5: ability to predict what the speaker is likely to say next

item 6: ability to understand English at a discourse level

item 12: ability to utilize schemata (background knowledge)

Factor 2 is named Progressive Prediction Ability. This ability concerns students' prediction ability in which they use schemata (background knowledge) to predict what is happening next within a certain context.

### 3. Factor 3 (Regressive Compensation Ability)

item 1: ability to cope with noise

item 2: ability to compensate for what is missed

item 3: ability to process what is heard in real time

We can call Factor 3 Regressive Compensation Ability because students fill in the missing information caused by extraneous noise and speed.

### 4. Factor 4 and Item 16

Items 14, 15 and 16 should be given a more comprehensive analysis. Even though items 14 and 15 have a tighter relationship and can be categorized into one factor (Factor 4), they do not deserve a special factorial name to represent the content clearly at this point.

Item 16, whose factor loading is relatively low, does not function well as a factor-structure item.

To explore the reasoning behind these otherwise unexplained cases, let us examine the four-factor structure of college teachers (Table 4 below) and high school teachers (Table 5 below) separately.

**Table 4 Four-Factor Structure of College Teachers**

item	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
1	-0.072	-0.079	0.127	0.852
2	-0.194	0.520	0.034	0.609
3	0.419	0.075	-0.130	0.708
4	0.351	0.664	-0.132	-0.014
5	0.047	0.798	-0.091	0.095
6	0.197	0.652	0.280	0.207
7	0.730	0.106	-0.150	0.210
8	0.633	0.383	-0.114	0.000
9	0.678	0.448	0.015	-0.034
10	0.775	-0.056	-0.020	0.045
11	0.655	0.010	0.099	-0.064
12	0.127	0.584	0.331	-0.177
13	0.375	0.141	0.239	-0.028
14	-0.194	0.250	0.731	-0.118
15	-0.023	0.019	0.782	0.084
16	0.278	-0.340	0.583	0.137
Percent of Total Variance explained	19.242	16.792	11.478	11.087

**Table 5 Four-Factor Structure of High School Teachers**

item	Factor			
	1	2	3	4
1	0.026	0.596	-0.099	0.284
2	-0.258	0.075	0.321	0.747
3	-0.165	0.738	-0.098	0.424
4	-0.113	0.543	0.328	-0.218
5	0.004	0.415	0.825	-0.058
6	0.308	0.614	-0.145	-0.255
7	0.819	0.132	0.115	-0.177
8	0.682	-0.029	0.377	0.137
9	0.723	0.116	0.072	0.018
10	0.406	0.087	-0.065	0.755
11	0.663	0.080	-0.492	-0.030
12	0.574	-0.169	0.212	0.343
13	-0.129	0.127	-0.457	-0.064
14	-0.282	0.390	-0.420	0.165
15	0.156	0.511	0.014	-0.021
16	0.125	-0.087	0.769	0.185
Percent of Total Variance explained	18.311	14.126	14.747	10.866

The four-factor structure of college teachers in Table 4 functions well and the close relationship among the three items (14, 15 and 16) establishes one factor, whereas the four-factor structure of high school teachers in Table 5 does not function well and gives no evidence for the relationship of the three items as one factor.

In other words, in the four-factor structure of the combined scores of college teachers and high school teachers in Table 3, the college teachers' structure gives great influence on the factor construction and helps to establish three clearly common factors between the two groups. Consequently, we were able to obtain three clear-cut factors (1, 2 and 3). However, there is a wide deviation between the two groups in the understanding of items 14, 15 and 16 as factor-forming variables. Thus, Factor 4 and item 16 remain unclear.

This discussion brings us to consider the varying reasoning for each group of English teachers. College teachers put more stress on the authentic material in a listening test than do high school teachers, who prefer to value the basic listening ability. This is probably not because high school teachers think less of the authenticity, but rather, college teachers have more freedom in adopting authentic material compared with high school teachers, who are mostly under the control of the guidelines of the Mombusho (the Ministry of Education).

When college teachers construct a listening test for high school teachers, which occasionally occurs, they must take into consideration this difference in teaching environment. However, if the purpose of the new test is to enlighten the high school teachers' views of listening, then the existence of Factor 4 (which could be called Authenticity Listening Ability) may be helpful for high school teachers in the future making to an innovative or novel listening test. This "Authenticity Listening Ability" deals with lecture type

note-taking ability and multi-dialogue type listening ability. The material is given without any modification to its original form. This might even be called "Non-modified text handling ability."

### **Comparison Between a New Construct of Listening and the Format of the JACET Basic Listening Comprehension Test**

#### **Summary of the JACET Test:**

##### **Part 1**

Four sentences are presented aurally and students choose the most appropriate one which matches the picture.

##### **Part 2**

The first half of a dialogue is presented as a cue. The second half (response answer) will then be chosen by the student from among the four choices.

##### **Part 3**

A short dialogue of a couple of sentences is presented, and then a question is asked about the dialogue. Students then choose the most appropriate answer from among the four choices.

##### **Part 4**

A short passage is presented, and then a couple of questions concerning the passage are asked. Students choose the correct answer out of the four choices presented orally.

### **Comparison Between the New Construct of Listening and the JACET Test**

Part 1 in the JACET Test obviously examines the students' intra-sentence level sound discrimination ability in context. The context is given in

the visual-picture form. This format matches Factor 1 "Intra-Sentence Listening Ability" in the new construct.

Part 2 in the JACET Test is a dialogue type which investigates students' prediction ability. The format is similar to the idea of Factor 2 "Progressive Prediction Ability" in the new construct. This may also be true for the lecture type test.

Part 3 and Part 4 in the JACET Test differ only in the types of passages presented, as the directions make clear in the manual. The former is a dialogue type and the latter is a lecture type. In both cases, students need to either compensate for what was missed in their listening or mentally retain the gist of the dialogue or lecture in a reasonable form. The idea of these two parts seems to coincide with that of Factor 3 "Regressive Compensation Ability" in the new construct.

In the new construct, items 14, 15 and 16 remained uncategorized and the JACET Test contains no items related to them. This may be the deviation between the idealized/ theoretical construct and the actual/ practical construct of listening. Idealistically, teachers admit that they need to include authentic material without any modification, even for the intermediate and the lower level students. Nevertheless, in the actual listening test they tend not to run the risk of adopting a new format.

If we consider the college teachers' factorial construct of items 14, 15 and 16 and establish it as one factor, then this can be a new aspect of the listening construct and an innovative facet that could be added to the listening test.



## V. Conclusion

### Components

Components of listening were proposed through the questionnaire results. Four factors were obtained and three of them were supported with theoretical comparison analysis. These three are 1) Intra-Sentence Listening Ability, 2) Progressive Prediction Ability and 3) Regressive Compensation Ability. The remaining elements, which seem to be important as a functioning factor of the listening construct, were left unjustified. The elements might form one important factor with a possible name being "Authenticity Listening Ability" or "Non-modified Text Handling Ability". However, further explanation will be left for future study because of the data limitation.

### Comparison Between College Teachers and High School Teachers

As the right most column in Table 2 shows, there was almost no significant difference in the mean scores between college teachers and high school teachers in their rating of the 16 items. College teachers generally give higher scores to each item than high school teachers.

There also seems to be a difference in the difficulty level orientation between high school teachers and college teachers. One way to look at this difference in difficulty orientation is to accept the same format of listening test for both groups of students, high school and college, and then adjust the grading to reflect a college student's advanced experience and knowledge over that of a high school student's.

Another possibility might be that the difference in scoring is due partially to the different teaching environments of college teachers and high

school teachers. Thus, the difference in scoring would then reflect a difference in variability allowed in each teaching environment. High school curriculum is strictly controlled by the Mombusho, while college curriculum is totally independent of the Mombusho guidelines.

Even though it is necessary to create a good balance between considering the high school situations in which teachers must follow the guidelines and the addition of a new innovative idea into a new test, it might be better to employ a gradual change to enlighten some teachers who have not yet had a chance to encounter a new definition of listening ability.

Factor analysis shows that 3 factors were commonly shared by the two groups (college teachers and high school teachers). Also there remained three items uncategorized within these three factors. They were not given to a clear justification for a factor formation. One possible reason is that there is a difference between the two groups in understanding these three items as factor-forming variables in the context of a listening test.

Although Item 16 "Authenticity" is evaluated high by both groups of teachers, there is no connection between Item 16 and Items 14 and 15 in high school teachers' idea. On the other hand, the college teachers did find a connection between items 14, 15 and 16 and categorized them together in one factor. This proves that the concept of the "authenticity" for college teachers is different from that of high school teachers.

Some ideas which have been brought into the construct of listening from the theoretical point of view should be included in the new test so that teachers will change their teaching focus and students will change their study habits. In other words, we should expect positive washback effects.

## **Comparison Between the New Construct and the JACET Test**

We were able to find similarities between the factors in the new construct and the test format of the JACET Test. Factor 1 well matches Part 1, Factor 2 can be a good equivalent of Part 2, and Factor 3 shares something in common with Parts 3 and 4. However, in the theoretical construct, there were three items which remained uncategorized. They were not clearly justified as one factor. The reason for this may be the deviation between the actual test situation and the ideally theoretical construct of listening.

Although both groups of teachers value the item "authenticity" from the results of the questionnaire, in the JACET Test there is no such part dealing with authentic material, probably because of the practical reason.

Ideally, both college teachers and high school teachers admit the importance of the authentic listening material (non-modified material). However, when it comes to the utilization of the authentic material for a listening test, they are hesitant to do so for a couple of reasons. One reason is that it is difficult to gauge relevant authentic material in terms of the difficulty level. Another reason is that finding material is different from making use of it for a listening test.

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## Appendix A

### Questionnaire

When you assess Japanese students' listening ability in class, how much weight do you put on each category below? Please circle one choice for each category. Also, please indicate the order of importance by giving a number in the parenthesis next to each item. If you would like to add more items to this list, please feel free to do so in the blank space.

		not		important
	important			important
1) ability to cope with noise	1	2	3	4
2) ability to compensate for what we miss	1	2	3	4
3) ability to process what you hear in real time	1	2	3	4
4) ability to grasp the context	1	2	3	4
5) ability to predict what the speaker is likely to say next	1	2	3	4
6) ability to understand English at a discourse level	1	2	3	4
7) ability to distinguish sounds (individual sounds)	1	2	3	4
8) ability to distinguish sounds (reduced forms, or weak forms)	1	2	3	4
9) ability to distinguish sounds (intonation, stress and rhythm)	1	2	3	4
10) ability to use vocabulary knowledge	1	2	3	4
11) ability to use grammar knowledge	1	2	3	4
12) ability to utilize schemata (background knowledge)	1	2	3	4
13) ability to understand sentence level English	1	2	3	4
14) ability to understand English in social settings	1	2	3	4
15) ability to deal with academic material	1	2	3	4
16) ability to deal with authentic English	1	2	3	4