Listening Practice for Improving Effectiveness of Spoken Communication

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Aural comprehension figures prominently in the field of second language acquisition. Indeed, at least one prominent theory—Krashen's (1985) comprehensible input hypothesis—identifies comprehensible input, and to a lesser extent reading, as the most effective way to acquire a second or foreign language. Although Krashen (2003) has subsequently set forth an extensive body of research findings to support his theory, it seems unlikely that this will bring an end to the criticism that has been consistently leveled at this hypothesis in the literature (Larsen-Freeman & Long, 1991).

Yet there are also instances of compelling evidence from more "independent" researchers that offer support for the efficacy of comprehensible input in second language acquisition. Lightbown, (1992) for example, conducted a study that compared the efficacy of a comprehension-based program—where young ESL learners only listened to and read English and had virtually no interaction with teachers or other learners—with a comparable, regular oral-aural ESL program. She found that the learners in the comprehension-based program learned English as well as, and in some cases better than, the learners in the regular program. To her surprise, she found that this applied not only to comprehension skills, but to speaking skills as well.

Against this backdrop, Celce-Murcia (1996) claims that of the four basic language skills, listening is the one we engage in the most, and when we do, we are mostly listening for discourse. While pointing out that the link between discourse and listening is all too often overlooked, she states:

> Other experimental evidence (Anderson and Lynch 1988:16) shows that learners who have had sufficient and focused task-based experience as listeners are able at some later time to perform an oral communication task better than other learners who had only been given prior speaking practice (i.e. giving practice only in listening was more effective than giving practice only in speaking). One can safely assume that giving practice with both skills—first listening, then speaking—would be the best possible preparation, but if the teacher

> does not have time to do both, then listening practice (with awareness-raising and analysis) should take precedence. (pp. 375-376)

For some EFL/ESL teachers this statement must surely elevate the relative importance of listening practice in the way they look at, plan, and manage classroom activities. However, the learners that Celce-Murcia identifies in relation to Anderson and Lynch's experimental evidence are not L2 learners—as her context would seem to suggest—but rather, native speakers. Anderson and Lynch (1988) state:

> When we conducted communication experiments in which a speaker had to instruct a listener in drawing a diagram or in arranging a set of objects, we found that the most effective spoken performances came from speakers who had previously been listeners on a similar task. Experience as a listener was more beneficial than practice in the speaking role, as it seemed to highlight the needs of the listener for clear and explicit instructions. Many of these *native speakers* [italics added] failed to produce 'listener-friendly' messages without prior listening practice (Anderson, Brown, and Yule, 1984). (p. 16)

Although there does not appear to be any particular reason to assume that the same process would not apply to both L1 and L2 speakers, at least some indications suggest that listening comprehension can be affected depending on whether the speaker is native or nonnative (Major, Fitzmaurice, Bunta, & Balasubramanian, 2002). In short, there seems to be a gap in the empirical support in the literature for the particular claims that both Anderson and Lynch (1988), and Celce-Murcia (1996) make regarding the relative benefits of prior listening practice over prior speaking practice on a subsequent speaking performance. The question arises as to whether or not a study that involved L2 learners would give the same results as the study by Anderson, Brown and Yule (1984) that involved native speakers.

The study by Anderson et al. (1984), which was the basis for the observations by both Anderson and Lynch (1988) and Celce-Murcia (1996), was a series of three experiments that studied a number of variables thought to influence a speaking performance, such as the presence of a listener, the level of difficulty of the task, the academic level of the participants, and the relative benefits of prior listening practice over prior speaking practice as referred to above. The experiment involving the latter variable is the focus of the present study.

The experiment by Anderson et al. (1984) consisted of two experimental conditions, speakers and speaker/hearers (speakers with hearing experience); participants were randomly assigned to one condition or the other. Participants were seated back to back and the speaker gave instructions to the hearer on the rearrangement of certain objects or on how to draw a certain diagram. The hearer's role was simply to arrange the objects

or draw the diagram in accordance with the speaker's instructions. After a ten-minute break, they exchanged roles and repeated the procedure. The speaking performances of the participants were then scored, analyzed, and compared.

Scores for the speaking performances were based on noting instances of the use of five prescribed elements by the speaker to try and help the hearer replicate the arrangement of objects or draw the pattern that the speaker was describing. These five elements were the name of the entity, its color and size, and the relative directions and distances between them. The experimenters' main interest was to try to objectively measure "the speaker's appreciation of the information required by the hearer to complete the task in question" (Anderson et al., 1984, p. 28), rather than communicative effectiveness per se, which would have to take into account the outcome of the procedure and include an assessment of the hearer's comprehension performance. Thus, the scoring reflected the range of elements used by the speaker, one point for each element that was used, for a maximum of five points. Additional instances of the same element did not increase the score. They found that the speakers with hearing experience produced significantly higher scoring performances ($p<0.005$) than speakers who did not have the prior hearing experience, leading the experimenters to conclude that "speakers who were randomly assigned to the speaker or speaker/hearer condition performed reliably better in the latter condition" (Anderson et al., 1984, pp. 37-38).

Thus, apparently on the basis of Anderson and Lynch's (1988) subsequent claim that "experience as a listener was more beneficial than practice in the speaking role" (p. 16), Celce-Murcia concluded that "giving practice only in listening was more effective than giving practice only in speaking" (p. 375). Although Celce-Murcia gives the impression that this evidence is related to L2 learners, the original experimenters make it clear that the participants were native speakers, and there does not seem to be any evidence in the literature of any similar study involving L2 learners.

Research Method

The aim of the present study was to investigate whether, in L2 communication, a previous listening activity was more helpful in the performance of a subsequent speaking task than a previous speaking activity. This could help us understand more about the relative significance of listening practice and speaking practice in the development of spoken communication ability among L2 learners. This study was based on one of the original experiments by Anderson et al. (1984)—the one that looked into the effects of prior listening experience compared with prior speaking practice on a subsequent speaking performance—but with three differences.

First of all, the participants were Japanese EFL learners instead of native speakers. Secondly, in their study, Anderson et al. (1984) are not explicit about the prior speaking practice of those in the speaking condition, and thus the present study sought to have an explicit speaking practice activity comparable to the hearing practice of those in the speaker/hearer condition. This entailed the addition of a third group and a third experimental session, as outlined below. Finally, for the purposes of convenience, there was a one-week interval between the experimental sessions rather than the 10-minute break in the original study by Anderson et al. (1984). While this additional time period could potentially lessen the extent of the influence of the two conditions under investigation (i.e., the effect of prior speaking practice compared to prior listening practice on a subsequent speaking performance), it should be noted that the same interval applied equally to both conditions.

In this investigation, the basic activity was the same in all three experimental sessions. Participants were put into pairs and each pair completed a diagram task similar to the original study, with speaker and listener seated back to back. The speaker was given a diagram and then gave instructions to the listener on how to reproduce this diagram exactly. The listener was directed not to ask any questions and to draw the diagram that was explained by the speaker. These speaking performances were recorded, scored, and then analyzed.

Participants

The participants were 51 first-year students of the Faculty of Agriculture at Tottori University, Japan. Their average age was 18 years old. The number of males was 28, and females, 23. They constituted a convenience sample and were members of a general education English oral communication class that met for ninety minutes, once a week. Typically, the population from which this sample was drawn exhibits a fairly wide range of English ability as indicated by their TOEIC scores which are usually in the 350 to 650 range, averaging around 450. The particular abilities of the participants in each condition in this study are unknown, but they were randomly assigned to each experimental condition.

Procedure and Materials

The procedure of the diagram task was based on the original study by Anderson et al. (1984). The participants were randomly assigned to three groups (A, B, and C), with each group composed of 17 participants. The study consisted of three sessions on three separate days, one week apart, with each group participating in two of these sessions as shown in Figure 1. However, it was only the second sessions of Groups A and B respectively that were intended to provide the data for analysis.

The participants were gathered in a room and given instructions, and then pairs of students went to a separate room to perform the experimental task, one pair at a time, while the rest continued with their regular weekly English lesson. The participants in Group A were the speakers in Sessions 1 and 2. The participants in Group B were the listeners in Session 2 and the speakers in Session 3. The participants in Group C fulfilled ancillary roles, first of all as the listeners in Sessions 1, to allow Group A to gain some prior speaking practice and secondly in Session 3, to allow Group B to give their speaking performance.

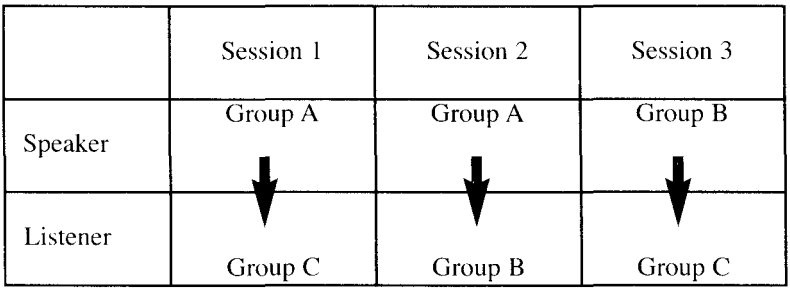

Figure 1: Research plan.

First, participants were put into pairs as speaker and listener. The speaker was handed a card with a diagram on it, and the listener was given a white card and pen. The size of the white card was the same as the diagram card that the speaker had. The speaker was asked to give instructions to the listener on how to draw the diagram as accurately as possible, and the listener was instructed to follow the speaker's instructions and attempt to duplicate the diagram being described without saying anything. They sat back to back during the activity. The speakers were given one minute to prepare and after that they were given four minutes to complete the task. If they finished their explanation before the time was up, and said so, they could end the session. None of the pairs required the full four minutes to complete the task.

Figures 2-4 show the diagrams that were used in this experiment. The first diagram was used in Session 1, the second diagram in Session 2 and the third diagram in Session 3. All diagrams provided an opportunity for the speaker to refer to the five elements of entity, color, size, direction, and distance as employed in the original experiments by Anderson et al. (1984). In the study itself, the cards were in full color, without the color labeling that appears in the diagrams in Figures 2-4.

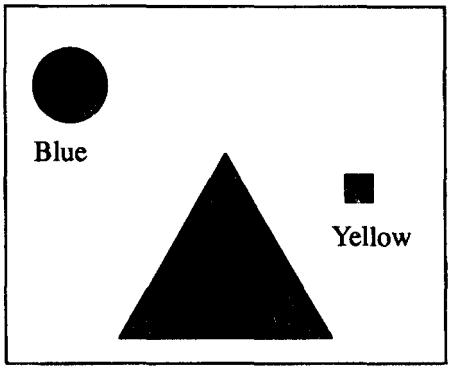

Figure 2: Diagram 1.

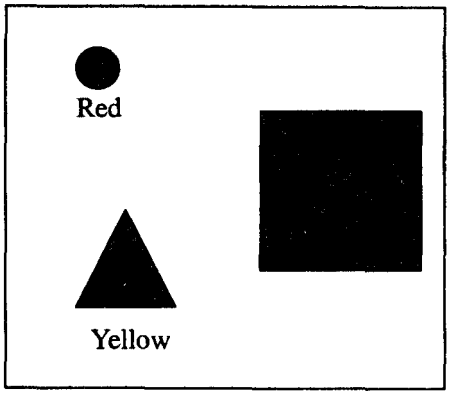

Figure 3: Diagram 2.

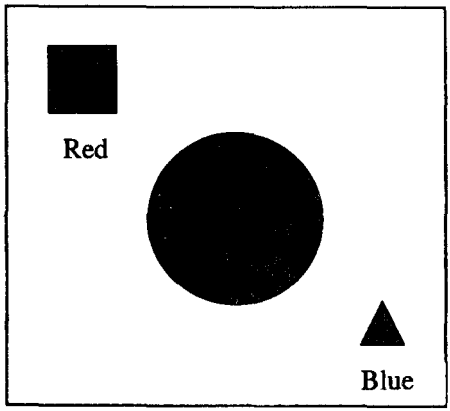

Figure 4: Diagram 3.

Scoring and Analysis

For each session, the speaker's performance was recorded and later scored. The focus of attention was not on linguistic competence, but rather "the speaker's appreciation of the information required by the hearer to complete the task in question" (Anderson et al., 1984, p. 28) as in the original study. Thus, the same five elements, entity, color, size, direction, and distance, were used to score the speaker's performance, shown on the scoring card in Figure 5. For example, when a speaker used a directional term such as *under*, the speaker was given one point for the element of *direction*. Each element carried one point, so the maximum number of points was 5. In order to test for the possibility that the speaking performance of Group B in Session 3 was significantly better than that of Group A in Session 2, in terms of the utilization of the five elements, a t-test was used to compare the means of the total scores of the two groups to see if there was any statistically significant difference between them.

Date:	Group:	Name:
Required Elements	**Example**	**Score**
Entity	square	
Color	red	
Size	big	
Direction	under	
Distance	one centimeter	
Total Score		

Figure 5: Scoring card.

Results

The difference between the means of the total scores of the second performances of Group A (whose first performance was speaking) and Group B (whose first performance was listening) was tested to see if it was statistically significant. The final number of participants in Group A was 16 (one student was absent in the second week and was eliminated from the study), and 17 in Group B. The results of the t-test are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

Speaking Performance Comparison Between Group A and Group B

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Group A	16	3.7500	.4472	.969	31	.340
Group B	17	3.5882	.5073			

Note: N = number of participants; t = t-test score; df = degree of freedom; Sig. = significance level.

The mean of the scores of Group A's performances in Session 2 was 3.75, and the mean of Group B's performances in Session 3 was 3.59. The result of the t-test shows that the degree of significance is .340, far greater than the generally accepted .05 level, meaning that there was no significant difference between the relevant speaking performances of Group A and Group B. Therefore, the results suggest that the previous listening activity that Group B took part in was not necessarily more helpful in the subsequent speaking task than the previous speaking activity that Group A took part in.

However, a secondary investigation into other data that was collected shows some additional evidence to suggest that Group A and Group B did perform differently. Table 2 shows the difference in the average time of the speakers' performances during each of the three sessions in this experiment. The time for Group B is shorter than both of the speaking performances of Group A. The biggest difference is between the first speaking performances of Group A and Group B, a discrepancy of 55 seconds. And there is still

a 20-second difference between Group A's second speaking performance and Group B's. This suggests that Group B might have given a more efficient speaking performance, and if so, this may well have been because of their prior listening experience.

Table 2

Difference in Time Taken by Groups to Complete the Speaking Task

Group	Average Time
Group A 1st	2 minutes 22 seconds
Group A 2nd	1 minute 47 seconds
Group B	1 minute 27 seconds

The pictures that the Group C listeners drew also provide some evidence of the relative communicative effectiveness of the relevant Group A and Group B speaking performances. In Session 1, Group A described their pictures to Group C, and in Session 3, Group B described their pictures to Group C. Thus in both cases, the same group did the drawings. One point of comparison is the number of drawings that exhibited signs of the five elements used in the scoring of the speaking performances described above. From most pictures it was possible to identify evidence of only four of the five elements: entity, color, relative size, and relative direction. Instances of distance were not readily discernable and thus distance as an entity was not considered in the comparison. Hence, the point of comparison adopted here was the number of pictures that exhibited signs of all four discernable elements.

As shown in Table 3, in Session 1, five students drew diagrams with four elements. In Session 3, eight students drew diagrams with four elements. Thus three more Group C members were able to draw pictures with four elements while listening to Group B descriptions than while listening to Group A descriptions. This apparent increase in performance on the part of Group C could have been the result of a practice effect, but

such an effect is probably limited to basic familiarity with the context and task of the experiment. The speakers in Groups A and B had no linguistic model to follow and gave highly idiosyncratic explanations to Group C. Given that participants were randomly assigned to Groups A and B, there is also no reason to suspect an underlying difference in language proficiency between these groups. In addition, these two sessions took place two weeks apart, the diagrams being described were different, and the sessions only lasted between 1½ and 2½ minutes in length, making it unlikely that Group C's second performance markedly benefited from their prior experience. Still, some degree of practice effect cannot be entirely ruled out and the extent of such an effect remains unknown.

Table 3

Comparison of Group C's Two Drawing Performances

Group	Pictures with Four Elements
Group A 1st ⟶ Group C	5
Group B ⟶ Group C	8

Time and Pictures

Group B speakers explained the diagrams in a shorter time than Group A speakers, and at the same time, more Group C listeners drew diagrams with four elements based on these shorter explanations by Group B. Group B speakers seem to have been able to give more detailed explanations in a shorter time. This suggests that Group B gave more efficient and more effective explanations, most probably as a result of their previous listening experience. Thus, although the primary findings of this study do not offer support for the findings of Anderson et al. (1984) in terms of a significantly greater spoken use of the prescribed elements in their study, secondary evidence does suggest that previous listening experience may lead to more effective and more efficient explanations and therefore possibly to an increase in the speakers' appreciation of the information required by the hearer to complete the task.

Conclusion

The results of this study appear to be inconclusive. On the one hand, no formal support was found for the notion that among L2 learners a prior listening experience provides better preparation for a subsequent related speaking task than a prior speaking experience. On the other hand, secondary evidence at least suggests that indeed a prior listening experience does seem to lead to a more effective and more efficient speaking performance. Obviously, additional research is needed, perhaps with several other L2 communities to determine whether prior listening activities might help improve later spoken performances.

In the absence of more compelling evidence, at the very least, it would appear prudent to view with caution the notion that when teachers may be faced with the choice between offering speaking practice or listening practice to their L2 students, they should give precedence to listening practice, as Celce-Murcia (1996) suggests. Thus, where time constraints may compel teachers to make a choice between listening and speaking practice, perhaps it would be wise for teachers to try to alternate between offering speaking practice and listening practice, rather than always giving priority to one or the other.

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Conference Announcements

Qatar TESOL Conference. April 14-15, 2006. "Best Practices in EFL," College of the North Atlantic, Doha, Qatar. Contact Jane Hoelker. Email:jhoelker@qf.org.qa.

Jordan Consortium of the Coalition of Distinguished Language Centers. April 18-20, 2006. "Conference on Distinguished Language Studies," Jordan University & Yarmouk University. Contact Betty Lou Leaver, 784 Northridge PMB 293, Salinas, California, USA 93906. Tel: (831) 886-2486 or (962) 79-9759611. Fax:: (831) 806-2486 or (962) 6-553-4761. E-mail: Leaver@aol.com. http://www.distinguished language centers.org.

ATESOL NSW and Australian Council of TESOL Associations. April 19-21, 2006. "Education for the Whole person: the TESOL Response," Sydney, New South Wales, Australia. Contact Robert Jackson, DET Multicultural Programs United Level 14, 1 Oxford Street, Darlinghurst, New South Wales 2010 Australia, E-mail robert.jackson@det.nsw.edu.au. http://www.atesolnsw.org.

National Chung Chen University. April 22-23, 2006. International Conference on English Instruction and Assessment, Chiayi, Taiwan. Contact Ms. Tang, Department of Foreign Languages & Literature, National Chung Cheng University, 168 University Rd., Min-Hsiung Chiayi, 621, Taiwan, R.O.C.Tel: (886) 5-2721108. Fax:: (886) 5-2720495. Email: admada@cuu.edu.tw. http://www.ccunix.ccu.edu.tw/~fllcccu/.