

A Pilot Study on Useful Knowledge

to Improve Listening Skill

—What is Expected to Teachers in Teaching English Pronunciation?—

Yuko TOMINAGA

Abstract

The objective of this research is to detect useful knowledge of phonetics for listening skill from the viewpoint of English teaching in Japan. This research is based on the data of the students who take a teaching-training course of a small women's university in Nagano prefecture, Japan. The participants answered a questionnaire which consists of seven items and two free answer questions about the knowledge taught in their classes, and then by comparing with their TOEIC IP⁽¹⁾ listening scores since 2018 to 2019, the results were analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. At this stage, there is no statistically significant difference between the students whose listening scores have increased by more than 100 points and those who have not.

I Introduction

In EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms, many learners are struggling with learning English, and also many teachers are struggling with teaching English. However, it is true that there still exist Prominent Language Learners (PLL) who are excellent in the four skills of English: reading, listening, speaking, and writing in the standardized English qualification tests. How, then, have they acquired such skills and maintained the skills? In order to detect some clues to and make suggestions for better teaching English to learners in EFL settings, this paper, in the perspective of knowledge of phonetics to improve listening skill, attempts to analyze the questionnaires and the listening scores between PLL and SLL (Slow Language Learners), focusing on their learning style, attitudes, and individual strategies that may have affected their listening. In this study, by tracing the listening scores of TOEIC IP and the results of a questionnaire, it is expected that significant awareness to teachers and learners—what knowledge has their eyes opened to listening—would be suggested for better teaching and learning.

II Rational

It can be said that today English is *de facto* an international language. The background of the expansion of English language is based on the power — political, military, economic, social, and cultural one — of the people who speak this language as a mother tongue. The number of people using English as a means of communication is over 1.6 billion⁽²⁾; in other words, one-third of world population use English in various ways. This “internationalization” of English language means that English has already deviated from the frame of British and American cultures and, at the same time, requires teachers of English in Japan to teach English from the viewpoint of EIL (English as an International Language).

On the grounds that the aim of teaching English to Japanese students should not be confined within the intelligibility to native speakers of English (NSE), it goes without saying that listening skill plays an important role to communicate with not only NSE but also non-NSE from the viewpoint of EIL or World Englishes (WE).

As a perception training for listening, alternative “minimal pairs”⁽³⁾ has been popular in classrooms. In recent years, a method called HVPT (High variability Phonetic Training) in which confusing phonemes are freely mixed and discriminated by stimulus sounds of various speakers seems to be effective (Thomson 2018). However, it is said that by giving the opportunity to touch the voice of various English speakers, including the real voice of teachers, it is possible to comprehensively image the various English pronunciations spoken by people around the world, and to foster steady listening skills. Such learning methods are available on the public site “English Accent Coach” on the Internet (Thomson 2017).

MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) announced new evaluation criterions in the course of study published in 2017. One of them is “Knowledge and Skills”. Teachers have to evaluate how students can use their knowledge to understand each other and express themselves. The problem is how we can evaluate the conceptual understanding of knowledge. MEXT suggests to evaluate that their knowledge acquired through learning is not only a recreation of what has been learned, but also both reconstruction and expression of the knowledge in a certain context. It means, for example, having students explain in text or discuss connections with concepts based on the knowledge. In order to do the work, what learners should notice first might be knowledge to analyze their own listening skill.

III Method

1. Participants

The participants were university students taking a teaching-training course in a small women's university in Nagano prefecture, Japan. They were divided into two groups, PLL and SLL. PLL was a group in which there were four students who scored more than 100 points higher in the listening section of TOEIC IP in July, 2019 than the previous test in July, 2018. On the other hand, SLL was a group which consisted of eight students who failed to improve their test scores as expected in the same tests (see Table 1). They started the course in September, 2018, and they are going to attend the teaching practice held in junior high schools in 2020. They have already taken a phonetics class and two TESOL classes for the teacher license by the end of January, 2020. All of the participants feel that their listening skills have improved in a year.

Table 1: Scores of TOEIC IP and Groups

Student	07/2018	07/2019	Difference	Group
#1	235	400	165	PLL
#2	215	365	150	PLL
#3	170	300	130	PLL
#4	250	370	120	PLL
#5	210	290	80	SLL
#6	220	290	70	SLL
#7	190	250	60	SLL
#8	250	310	60	SLL
#9	180	235	55	SLL
#10	190	230	40	SLL
#11	260	295	35	SLL
#12	170	190	20	SLL

2. Procedure

First, a questionnaire survey was conducted on the participants, both SLL and PLL. The questionnaire consists of seven items and two free answer questions regarding their learning style, attitude, and strategy they use. Next, in order to examine which factor contributes to the differences between the PLL and SLL in the results of the questionnaire, t-test was conducted on the multiple-choice questions.

Then, regarding the items in the questionnaire that the test statistically indicated significant correlations, the results of the free answer questions of the participants were examined in order to gain a detailed understanding of how these factors contributed to the improvement of the PLL.

3. Questionnaire

The questionnaire first asked the participants to rank the best five items that help with their listening skills using the numbers 1 to 5. The number 5 shows the best reason for the participants and is converted to 5 points when tabulating the data.

- A) Function words are pronounced softly, and content words are strongly pronounced at regular intervals.
- B) Japanese is a syllable-timed language, and English is a stress-timed language.
- C) Knowledge of linking, assimilation, elision, and weakening.
- D) Knowledge of prosody: stress, rhythm, and intonation.
- E) In a natural sentence, the nucleus⁽⁴⁾ is placed on the last content word of the intonation phrase (IP)⁽⁵⁾.
- F) Japanese and English have different word orders. Getting used to English word order is helpful.
- G) Having the knowledge of the background of the story / situation.

The items A) to E) above are phonetic knowledges for listening, and F) and G) are related to the overall four skills. The next two questions asked the participants to write the answer freely to:

- 1) What are you particularly aware of when listening?
- 2) What experiences have influenced your listening skill?

IV Results

Figure 1 shows the simple summary of the average points between SLL and PLL. It indicates that SLLs tended to use the knowledge of phonetics for their listening; on the other hand, PLLs did not use the knowledge of phonetics. PLL highly valued the knowledge A: content word, function word, and isochrony⁽⁶⁾, and SLL highly evaluated the knowledge F: different word orders. In contrast, it was obvious that none of PLL used the knowledge of word order difference (F). Also, it was interesting that PLL did

not depend on prosody (D). It seems that the viewpoints of listening English are different between PLL and SLL.

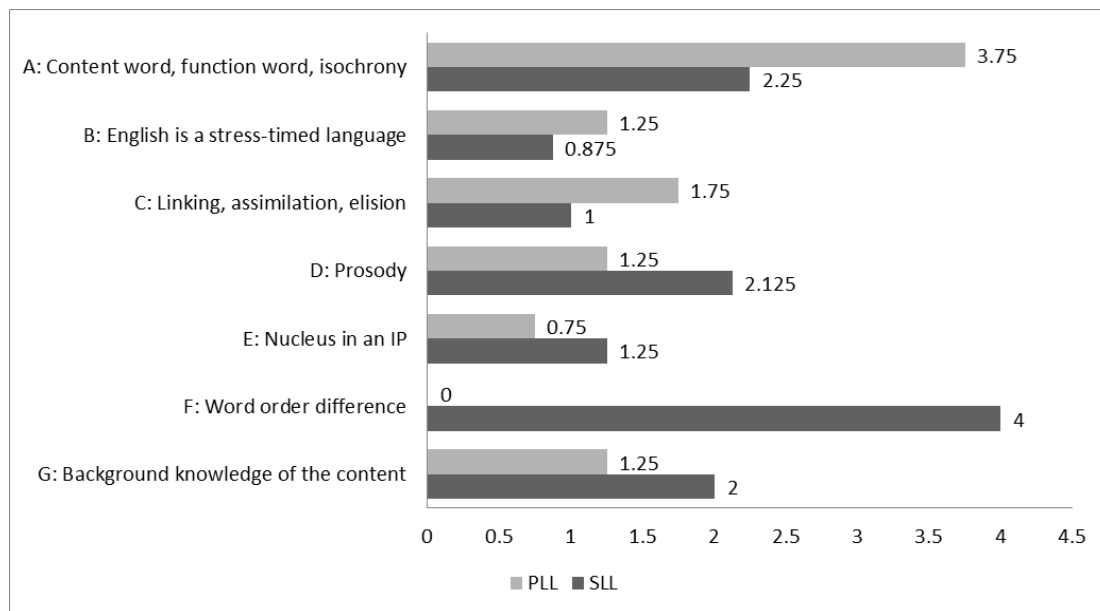


Figure 1: The average points between SLL and PLL

Table 2 indicates the results of the t-tests for the questionnaire. Only one item is identified as significant factor for the difference between PLL and SLL. The item of the significant factor between the two groups is G) Japanese and English have different word orders. Getting used to English word order is helpful. Generally, the item that can be considered to have statistically significant difference between the PLL and the SLL is related to the overall four skills, not to concrete listening skill. One of the problems of this study is that the number of the participants was not enough, so it cannot be said that this statistic is true for all. However, there is no doubt that learners' knowledge of their listening strategies will help them improve their autonomy.

Table 2: The results of the t-tests on seven items: mean (SD)

Items	PLL	SLL	P
A) Function words are pronounced softly, and content words are strongly pronounced at regular intervals.	3.75 (1.3)	2.25 (2.3)	.291
B) Japanese is a syllable-timed language, and English is a stress-timed language.	1.25 (1.6)	0.88 (1.2)	.686
C) Knowledge of linking, assimilation, elision, and weakening.	1.75 (1.5)	1.00 (1.1)	.392
D) Knowledge of prosody: stress, rhythm, and intonation.	1.25 (2.2)	2.13 (1.8)	.519
E) In a natural sentence, the nucleus is placed on the last content word of the intonation phrase (IP).	0.75 (1.3)	1.25 (1.2)	.559
F) Japanese and English have different word orders. Getting used to English word order.	0.00 (0.0)	4.00 (1.7)	.0013 **
G) Having the knowledge of the background of the story / situation.	1.25 (1.6)	2.00 (2.0)	.567

* p < .05 ** p < .01 *** p = .00

When the numerical value of the t-tests was under .05, it means a significant factor. It is shown by asterisked mark.

In order to make up for what could not be revealed by data in the statistical processing, free descriptions were referred to. From the descriptions common factors were observed that might affect the listening skill.

. First question was: what are you particularly aware of when listening?

PLL's answers:

- 1) Even if I miss function words, I do not think about them deeply, listen to the content words as many as possible and guess the meaning of the speech.
- 2) It makes listening much easier to understand the rhythm of linking and the dynamics of the sound.
- 3) I am always aware of content words when I listen to English.
- 4) I try to listen to the first phrase; for example, 5W1H.

SLL's answers:

- 1) I try not to translate English into Japanese in my mind while listening.
- 2) I try to listen to content words.
- 3) I try to listen to only content words and try not to listen to everything.
- 4) I pick up only the words I can understand.
- 5) Instead of trying to translate English into Japanese while listening, I try to understand the content roughly.
- 6) I am aware of listening in English word order.
- 7) I try to read questions first when I take listening tests.

The second question was: what experiences have influenced your listening skill?

PLL's answers:

- 1) When I hear English in town, I try to listen to it.
- 2) I like chatting with people on a language exchange site.
- 3) I am able to understand English announcements at stations and airports.

SLL's answers:

- 1) For university entrance exam preparation.
- 2) When I came back from Australia, I became able to understand English I hear.
- 3) I failed the test of EIKEN⁽⁷⁾ 2nd grade.
- 4) I came to imagine situations more than words.
- 5) I try to be calm and listen to English.

Other comments:

- 1) I am happy to know about content words and function words.
- 2) I passed the test of EIKEN 2nd grade. (three students)
- 3) My TOEIC score went up by about 200 points. (two students)

As an overall impression, SLLs seem to pay attention to content words when listening. Also, they tend to use terms of phonetics they learned when they give some comments about themselves. On the other hand, SLLs seem to pay attention to the strategies for proficiency tests to get more points. They tend to strongly focus on practice rather than knowledge.

V Discussion

1. Knowledge and Skill

Receptive skills like listening and reading cannot be directly observed. The two skills are usually measured indirectly. In fact, as for listening skill, it is unclear how much instruction can be given to learners. In EFL classrooms, it can be true that many learners are struggling with learning listening skill, and also many teachers are struggling with teaching listening skill. Matsumoto (2019) introduces several activities for listening to the teachers who are struggling with teaching it. The activities are the use of small talk, reading aloud, and dictogloss⁽⁸⁾. These activities are indeed helpful to improve listening skill as practice. The more time learners spend practicing, the more confidence they might have. However, if they do not notice significant clues for listening, they might spend much more time practicing than expected to improve their listening skill. Therefore, in listening as well, an exquisite balance of knowledge and practice will make learners successful. Figure 2 indicates a simple aggregate of the participants' questionnaire scores. The five black bars (A to E) show items indicating knowledge they have learned in the phonetics and TESOL classes.

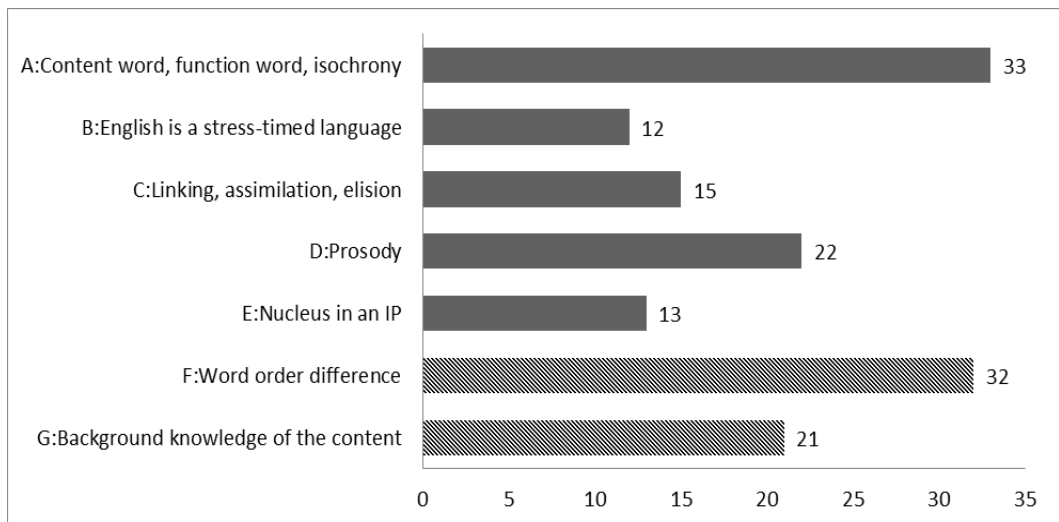


Figure 2: Simple aggregate of the questionnaire scores

2. PLL vs SLL

It is obvious that most participants were aware of the features of content words and function words. The knowledge seems new and interesting to them. One participant commented that she was happy to know about content words and function

words. One of the noticeable things is that PLLs were not aware of each factor of prosody: rhythm, stress, and intonation so much. It is considered that PLLs coped with these factors by including them in the knowledge of isochronous and stress-times language, according to their comments. On the other hand, despite the fact that none of the PLLs mentioned it, SLLs were strongly aware of word order difference. It is said that this knowledge is the foundation of English. Learners would have noticed the knowledge since they started learning English. In order to improve their listening skill, they probably need to take their learning step further. Also, knowing the background of the story seems to be helpful to SLLs when listening. Using background knowledge is certainly effective for learning English. However, the primary purpose of listening is to be able to understand what you hear for the first time. There is always only one chance. The overall trend seems to be that PLLs take a comprehensive view of listening, while SLLs pay attention to individual words and sounds.

3. Learners' Strategies

In this survey, to the question, "What experiences have influenced your listening skill?" their responses were various. SLLs' answers are:

- When I hear English in town, I try to listen to it.
- I like chatting with people on a language exchange site.
- I am able to understand English announcements at stations and airports.

These answers indicate that along with the progress in their listening skill, the PLL tend to learn more spontaneously and independently. Also they appear to have their original learning strategies, and they spontaneously conduct their own practice every day. Therefore, it can be said that together with the learning time period, those who are interested in learning English are more likely to develop their own learning strategies, which contribute to make them PLL.

4. Teachers' Intervention

As the results of this study show, teachers' intervention appears to be a factor that contributes to generating learners' listening skill. In fact, one PLL in this study answered in the questionnaire that she was happy to know about content words and function words. It is clear that the knowledge she has been taught in the phonetics and TESOL classes has improved her listening skill. Such interventions from the teachers

seem to have worked well in improving learners' skills. Conversely, it can be said that if learners had few chances to encounter with appropriate teachers' intervention, they would not be able to move forward to improve their skills. In fact, under the current circumstances such as EFL setting, it may be difficult for teachers and learners to focus mainly on just listening. However, the teachers can make a number of 'small' changes: they can rethink about their own attitudes toward teaching, they can make an effort to improve their own listening skills, and they can create a method that gives their students proper intervention and feedback both inside and outside class, to name a few. As already mentioned above (III-1), more or less, it is clear that all participants of this study realize that their listening skills have improved by the teacher's intervention. Especially, at the moment, two of them cannot noticeably change their test scores, but feel that their listening skills have improved considerably. The awareness will eventually lead them to success in the near future. Giving learners the opportunity of "awareness" is one of the significant roles of teachers.

VI Conclusion

In this research, in order to identify the contributory factors for the improvement of Japanese learners' English listening skill, the answers of questionnaire of twelve university students were analyzed, and the findings of this research indicate that in listening, not only activities or practices but also learning knowledge should be laid emphasis because it is possible that these items contribute to the understanding of main idea and details. Strictly speaking, the importance of rhythm (including the relation between content and function words, isochronism, and stress-timed language in this study) was found. It is the most contributory factor for listening. In particular, under the perspective of teaching EIL this finding would be important.

On the other hand, in order to overcome the problem that students are likely to be accustomed to typical Japanese accent of English, what is expected to Japanese teachers in teaching English pronunciation? At the present stage of this research, the following three roles can be pointed out as teachers' reminders.

- 1) Teachers should have enough, or at least basic, knowledge of English pronunciation.
- 2) Teachers should develop the ability to identify possible problems specific to their own students and offer solutions to them in advance or timely.
- 3) Teachers should endeavor to improve their own English pronunciation.

Then, what kind of English pronunciation should Japanese learners acquire from the viewpoint of EIL? The author believes that in order to make themselves understood and to understand what the interlocutor says, Japanese learners should learn the basic theory of phonetics, learn to pronounce some pronunciations that do not exist in Japanese language, and acquire rhythm that leads to fluency. Therefore, teachers should lay emphasis on these points in their teaching to Japanese learners. However, from the viewpoint of EIL, another issue arises: Are native speakers of English ideal teachers? They are not necessarily so, because they tend to speak English as a folk language, instead of consciously speaking it as an international language. To be concrete, native speakers of English are less likely to know the specific difficulties and obstacles for EFL learners in learning and acquiring English. Moreover, they are less likely to have enough understanding of and insight into learners' cultural backgrounds. In this sense, and in this sense only, non-NSE might be the most desirable teachers.

If pronunciation is regarded as the basic physical strength of English, phonetics is considered to be indispensable. Taguchi (2012) mentioned that according to a survey conducted in 2006, about 70% of English teachers in Kochi prefecture had taken phonetics classes during their university days. The majority of them learned some knowledge in the classes, but never had their pronunciation corrected with practice. It might be said that most teachers in junior and senior high schools in Kochi have not experienced how to pronounce English properly before being a teacher. From 2019, the students who want to be a teacher must take a phonetics class according to MEXT new core-curriculum of teacher-training course. That is good news. The beginning of a new era of English teaching would be expected

Notes

- (1) TOEIC IP is a system that allows participants to hold an exam for more than 10 people at schools or workplaces, unlike the open test for individuals.
- (2) The number is based on the data by Crystal (2002).
- (3) Minimal pair means in a language, two words with different forms that are used to identify the range of phonemes that are the smallest units that can distinguish the meaning of a word.
- (4) In phonetics, nucleus means the highest pitch which is put on the last content word of a sentence or intonation phrase.
- (5) IP is generally a unit of meaning pronounced in a short breath. It is also called a "tone group".
- (6) Isochrony is a term in phonetics. It means regular intervals between words.
- (7) EIKEN is the Test in Practical English which is one of the popular tests in Japan.
- (8) Dictogloss is an activity to restore sentences by discussing in pairs or groups, remembering what you heard, relying on notes.

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