Language Research Bulletin, 22, ICU, Tokyo

Focused Listening: Development of a Balanced Listening Curriculum in EAP

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In an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) setting, students are expected to develop listening skills to digest academic content that is intellectually challenging even in their L1, while fostering communication skill through effective listening habits. A balanced listening curriculum would combine "bottom-up" and "top-down" processing skills in one curriculum. Various researchers point out the importance of these two types of processing skills (Buck, 1995; Rost, 2002); however, there haven't been many studies that suggest how instructors actually can combine these two types of skills in the classroom or how to assess the validity of such a curriculum in terms of the combination of these skills. The main purpose of this article is to suggest an approach for developing a well-balanced listening component to an EAP multi-skills curriculum. Using as a model the listening curriculum developed for Akita International University (AIU) EAP students, the authors will refer to the Focused Listening course at AIU and discuss issues related to the AIU model. First, we will provide an overview of Focused Listening courses at AIU. Then, components of a balanced listening curriculum will be discussed followed by various aspects of the construction of listening materials.

Overview of Focused Listening at AIU

From its inception in 2004, the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program at Akita International University (AIU) has placed great importance on the building of listening skills through its Focused Listening (FL) classes. However, it hasn't been easy to develop an

effective listening curriculum. Much of this difficulty can be attributed to the fact that listening is a complicated process that includes various steps: (1) physically receiving messages; (2) remembering; (3) selecting and organizing information; (4) interpreting communication; and (5) responding (Wood, 2004); and to the fact that listening comprehension requires both "bottom-up" and "top-down" information-processing skills to carry out the functions listed above (Buck, 1995; Rost, 2002).

Focused Listening classes are offered in each of the three levels of the AIU EAP program, Level One being for students with up to a 459 TOEFL score, Level Two for those with a score between 460 and 479, and Level Three for students with a 480 or greater. The Focused Listening courses in levels one and two have four 50-minute classes each week, and level three has three 50-minute meetings. These classes are held in one of AIU's Language Laboratories that contains 25 study carrels, each with a PC connected to AIU's intranet, and the Internet. Through this system, students have access to shared class files containing syllabus information as well as assignment worksheets and mp3 audio files for class assignments. Using the media player software installed in the computers, students independently control the playback of audio files and have the opportunity to listen to individual tracks as many times as they find necessary to successfully complete an exercise. Students spend the majority of time in class working independently. Assignments are lengthy and meant to be finished as homework. Periodically the instructor uses some class time for discussion and explanations. However, for the most part, during class the instructors are available as facilitators and resource people, answering questions, offering advice, distributing and collecting homework assignments, conducting quizzes, and coping with technical problems as they arise.

Instructional Design Principals for Focused Listening

A short list of instructional principles informs and balances the basic design of the AIU Focused Listening courses. Most generally these principles are bottom-up/top-down dual approaches with particular concern for bottom-up processing, student-centered learning, and a positive learning climate. In addition to these general principles are the more specific considerations of anchored instruction and cognitive flexibility. A discussion of these principals will follow in discussions of the core components of the Focused Listening courses.

A Bottom-up/Top-down Approach for Overall Balance

Two main components of the listening curriculum described below are “Deep Listening,” a “bottom-up” transcribing approach (Clark, 1993), and “top-down” academic lecture note taking. Both quantitative (e.g. accuracy rate for transcription) and qualitative data (e.g. student interviews) collected through the past two years indicate that the approach to combine “bottom-up” and “top-down” processing in a curriculum functions to develop students’ listening skills in a balanced way

For our purposes, a working definition of bottom-up processing is the word-level linear processing of a piece of spoken language through transcription with the goal of accurately recording and comprehending the whole (Mendelsohn, 1994). Rost (2002) makes a further distinction within this linear processing by breaking it down into speech perception and word recognition. According to Rost, these bottom-up processes “provide the ‘data’ for comprehension.” To define top-down processing, we refer to Mendelsohn's (1994) description of the process as "holistic" and "interpretive," building a model of meaning that's based on what’s heard and then putting that information into context and interpreting it using prior knowledge. Andersen & Lynch (1988) provide a useful summary of the basic difference between bottom-up and top-down processing by describing the former as "listener as tape recorder" and the latter as "listener as model builder." Mendelsohn (1994) advocates using a mix of these two approaches, leaning more toward top-down processing, but providing both to better meet a broad range of training needs in a balanced way. Our FL curriculum departs from Mendelsohn’s recommended approach in that we put a somewhat greater emphasis on bottom-up processing.

Core Components of Focused Listening Classes

The two core components of the FL curriculum are “Deep Listening” and “Academic Lecture Note Taking.” These two components are meant to exercise the two types of processing, bottom-up and top-down respectively, using two distinct sets of listening activities. Through the course of a week, students are assigned one unit each of Deep Listening and academic-lecture note taking exercise units. In addition to these core components, a few days of the term are spent on TOEFL

listening practice since a student's TOEFL score is a deciding factor for promotion to the next level.

Bottom-up Processing Though Deep Listening

Bottom-up processing is exercised through Deep Listening, inspired by the "*Ango Kaidoku* system" as conceived by Gregory Clark (1993, 1996), and further developed by the authors of this article (Hoskins, Maeda, & Johnson, 2006). Aside from being an intriguing name, the term Deep Listening is intended to convey to students the idea that they need to concentrate deeply while working through the exercises, especially the lecture-dictation section, of each unit. In the AIU Focused Listening classes, Deep Listening takes the form of a collection of units of dictation-based activities using academic and/or study skills content that is based on subject matter of concurrent EAP courses presented on digital audio files, and on-line electronic and paper worksheets. Each unit is divided into three sections: (1) pre-deep listening activities; (2) Deep Listening, i.e. dictation followed by reflective listening activities; and (3) post-deep listening activities. Pre-deep listening exercises are designed to introduce the topic to activate any prior knowledge students may have related to the topic by having students work in various ways with important vocabulary, and to “warm-up” the listening apparatus for further listening. The Deep Listening dictation exercise involves transcribing while listening to an academic lecture followed by carefully correcting the transcription and then listening reflectively while reading the self-corrected transcription. Post-listening activities provide consolidation through additional student-directed vocabulary-building, short writing exercises, comprehension and discussion-based activities and dictogloss exercises. Each completed unit is turned in to the instructor who provides feedback in the form of comments and scores (for those sections not self-corrected by the students).

Content is deliberately written or chosen for adaptation from texts and content-based subject matter used in the students’ other EAP classes. This allows students greater opportunities to recycle knowledge, vocabulary, and concepts dealt with in their other coursework through highly focused listening activities. A cross-section of faculty members’ voices are used in making audio recordings, allowing students to both become familiar with the voices and speaking mannerisms of their instructors while experiencing a wide range of English language accents.

Reliance on dictation for listening training in foreign language acquisition and second language acquisition has a long history. Rost (2002) refers to it as the "prototypical intensive listening activity." Other researchers (e.g., Cohen, 1994; Buck, 1992) have pointed out the superiority of dictation as an integrative exercise of listening due to its inclusion of listening along with the processing of grammar, vocabulary, and making inferences from context. Certainly the amount of variations on the basic theme of dictation is a testament to both its longevity and utility. Some of these variations are fast-speed dictation, pause and paraphrase dictation, listening cloze (fill-in-the-blank) dictation, error identification, and jigsaw dictation, which has students put dictated sentences into a logical order (Rost, 2002), and the dictogloss technique developed by Merrill Swain (1995), which requires students to listen to a short passage, discuss its contents, and paraphrase the information orally or in writing.

What may distinguish our Deep Listening from other dictation exercise types is that rather than being one type of exercise, it's a balanced array of various forms of dictation, utilizing: cloze dictation; dictation of single vocabulary items, of single sentences, and of full texts; and dictogloss, which includes elements of pause and paraphrase dictation. Another distinguishing factor is the use of reflective listening in which students, after completing the DL dictation, listen again while reading through their self-corrected dictations, highlighting or otherwise noting those words and phrases that were previously incomprehensible, and experiencing them again, thus providing aural as well as visual and kinesthetic confirmation.

Top-down Processing

Top-down processing is implemented through the use of a collection of standard academic-style lectures from a variety of academic subjects presented in digital audio files with (1) pre-listening activities, including various vocabulary building exercises, questions designed to stimulate thinking about the topic, and note taking tips (2) academic-lecture note taking, first focusing on main ideas, the gist, and later on details, and (3) post-listening activities, including a quiz with discreet-point-type multiple choice questions and short essay writing. Students rely on their lecture notes to complete the quizzes. Currently we are using the texts *Contemporary Topics I, II, III* for this component of the course.

Balance through Instructional Design

Student-Centered Learning: Balancing Responsibilities of Teachers & Students

As mentioned previously, while Focused Listening classes include regular interaction between the instructor and students and among students, most of the time students work on class assignments individually using notepaper and hardcopy or on-line document worksheets, along with audio files and exercise keys available in a shared computer file. This instructional design lends itself well to a student-centered approach. For this course, students take significant responsibility for managing their working time and to a significant extent for monitoring their own progress toward goals set in the class syllabus. The instructor acts as a work-flow supervisor and resource person, setting policies and procedures for the class; creating the syllabus with a schedule of assignments; developing and disseminating materials; monitoring the progress of students; building, organizing and maintaining shared materials files in the language laboratory computer system; regularly providing class-related information through in-class explanations and announcements; and offering feedback in the form of comments, discussions, and the marking of assignments, quizzes, and tests. At the same time, students are responsible for keeping up with the assignments, and for checking and scoring some portions of their own exercises and submitting their score data to the instructor. Between the time assignments are given and are due, students decide for themselves how to structure the time they spend working on the various Focused Listening assignments. Study materials are made available well in advance of their assignment due dates, and students may work ahead of the class schedule if they choose to do so. Students may also see any and all data that pertain to their individual progress and eventual class grade at any time, and are encouraged to question and discuss the grading.

Positive Climate for Learning: Balance of Sense of Ownership

A student-centered approach to the instructional design has an empowering effect on students. Students are given both the responsibility and freedom to choose how they go about achieving the goals of the class. Parameters for performance, for due dates of various assignments, for scoring exercises, quizzes, and class grades are clearly presented and consistently followed, and students have the responsibility to perform

within those limits. At the same time, within those boundaries, students make choices about what they will do, when and how they will do it, and in reflection, judgments about how well they accomplished their goals. In the process of making choices about how to do a task or set of tasks and exercising judgments about their success, there is a natural movement toward awareness of one's own reasons for wanting to accomplish the tasks, which in turn encourages internalization of those goals. That internalization, in turn, strengthens motivation, a feeling of "being in the driver's seat" of one's own learning. All of this can be empowering.

Since responsibility for aspects of performance is shared between the instructor and the students, the relationship between them can take a less hierarchical, more collegial form. Students accustomed to a more traditional teacher-centered education generally seem to appreciate a more equal distribution of roles and find the sort of working relationship inherent in a student-centered class to be refreshing and motivating. At the same time, there is a psychological comfort in having set parameters and in being able to receive individualized support and guidance by the instructor made possible by the course design. The evaluation system can progressively penalize late or incomplete assignments if the instructor sees a necessity to do so. However, while there are some negative inducements for non-performance pushing from behind, there are no structural impediments lying ahead that would in any way tend to slow students' progress through the exercises.

Anchored Instruction

Each unit of exercises is built around a lecture that serves as a "macro context for teaching" (Bransford, 1990; Bransford & Stein, 1993). All FL exercises work with the content, structure, and vocabulary in the lecture providing a means of integrating and reinforcing learning experiences. The original materials produced by instructors that are mainly bottom-up in nature relate to the authentic academic text being used in students' core classes. Commercially available text/CD listening materials for note taking, which are basically top-down in nature, deal with a variety of academic subjects students may encounter in university classes after their EAP courses.

Balancing Types of Input to Foster Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to process the same input in a variety of forms or ways. Input that is multimodal is "likely to be processed more thoroughly and be retained in a more meaningful way," and encourages cognitive flexibility (Spiro, et al., 1988; Clark & Paivio, 1991). Multiple representations of content various forms such as texts, audio files, and graphic images provide learning experiences that are more stimulating, memorable and enjoyable. In the process of doing a unit of Deep Listening exercises or of academic-lecture note taking, students repeatedly encounter vocabulary, expressions, and related pieces of information through a variety of listening tasks and work with a body of content in a variety of ways, thus stimulating cognitive flexibility.

Construction of Deep Listening Materials and the Delivery System

For the Deep Listening materials, elements such as the basic dictation text, worksheets, and answer keys are written using Microsoft Word; class records for Deep Listening assignments are organized and completed using Microsoft Excel. Student worksheets that are more conveniently completed by hand are printed out and distributed to students. Worksheets that require typing, notably the Deep Listening dictation itself, are made available as on-line documents that students access and copy out of a shared file on the class intranet.

Recordings are made using portable computers with quality microphones and an audio interface to turn the recorded sound into digital information for downloading and processing on the computer. Voice talent is recruited from among the AIU faculty providing a variety of speakers and accents. After compiling and editing audio files in the computer, sound files are converted to mp3 format and made available for student access from folders in the class intranet shared file. All computers in the AIU Language Laboratory automatically open either Windows Media Player or Real Player as the default media player for sound files. Both players have similar interfaces and are equally easy to control allowing students to conveniently stop and start recordings or freely move the "playhead" forward and backward through the sound file. While most students bring their own headphones or earphones for listening, headphones are available for students to borrow during the class time. Audio files and text answer keys for note taking are downloaded into the computer. Students use the textbook for completing those exercises.

Student Responses to Class Survey

Data was collected in AIU FL classes at the end of the spring term of 2006 from surveys of students' comments and opinions on class activities, materials, and their own perceived progress in listening skill. In addition to open-ended written responses, students were asked to respond to items using a sliding scale of 1 to 5 to indicate a level of agreement with a statement offering a value judgment on an aspect of the class or materials. 107 FL students in all three levels of the EAP responded to the survey.

Although more detailed surveys were given, relevant to this paper, students' responses to the following three general statements are summarized here. These statements are:

1. Overall, class materials have helped me improve my English listening skills.
2. Overall, the three kinds of materials were well balanced in class.
3. Overall, the Focused Listening class has helped me to improve my listening skills.

In addition to quantitative data, written comments pertaining to the above questions were also collected. Thorough analysis of students' written responses is not yet completed, and the presentation of comments here is not comprehensive, but is included to provide some sense of what opinions students expressed relevant to the statements noted above. Students responded to the above statements by choosing a number on a five-point scale. Each number was associated with a word or phrase indicating a level of agreement ranging from *strongly agree* (5 on the scale) through *agree* (4), *no opinion* (3), *disagree* (2) to *strongly disagree* (1).

Concerning the first statement that the class materials in general were useful in promoting listening skill development, students' responses averaged 4.3 on a 5-point scale. When specific sets of materials were evaluated, the utility of the Deep Listening dictation exercise sequence was rated at 4.5 on a 5 point scale while lecture listening note taking materials were given a value of 4.0 on a 5-point scale. On the question of whether or not the materials were well balanced, students indicated a level of agreement of 4.0. When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement that the FL class was helpful in promoting listening skill,

students indicated a level of agreement of 4.5, reflecting a fairly high level of satisfaction.

Conclusion

The idea of using a sequence of exercises that develop listening skills in a balanced way is intuitively appealing. Relevant literature on instructional design of listening training as well as the direct experience of the authors of this article support the contention that such balance is not only preferable, but essential if students are to be given an adequate skill base with which to meet the challenges of academic listening in a second language. The authors of this article contend that a combination of bottom-up dictation-based Deep Listening exercises and top-down lecture note taking exercises with accompanying pre- and post- activities provides a way of achieving an effective overall balance in listening skill development.

Improvements in the evaluation of FL needed to better facilitate improvements in all aspects of FL classes. Additional information on students' performance and perceptions will need to be collected as the course design and materials continue to be refined. Refinements in the formatting and construction of questions in the FL class survey form need to be implemented to improve the quality and quantity of information obtained from students. Correlation of student data such as assignment and quiz scores with listening sections of TOEFL tests periodically given for assessment and promotion can provide an additional way to assess the effects of FL on students' listening skill development, pending permission to use TOEFL data for research purposes.

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