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HOW TO TEACH LISTENING?

THE IMPACT OF RAPID ORAL READING AND REPEATING PRACTICES ON TOEIC LISTENING SCORE

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ABSTRACT

Given the recent the shifts in English education policy by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) to educate global citizens with high English competence and high TOEIC scores, identifying effective listening pedagogies seems an impending issue at the college level EFL classes in Japan. As Japanese students are struggling more in listening to English sentences than reading, this paper explores 1) how to teach listening skills in L2 among Japanese college students by exploring a theory regarding speech perception (Motor Theory of Speech Perception), and 2) if pedagogical practices that are in alignment with the theory (in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices) lead to students' significant TOEIC listening score differences or not. Research participants are college students taking English classes and they are asked to take TOEIC exam at the end of the semester. The paper compares contrasts and analyzes the scores of students to explore if these pedagogical practices are effective in raising TOEIC listening scores or not. The research result indicates that engaging in in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices results in higher TOEIC listening scores. Based on the research result and given the limitation of the research, the paper also identifies the area that requires further researches to make these pedagogical practices further effective at the college level EFL classes in Japan.

Key Words: TOEIC, Listening Pedagogy, Motor Theory of Speech Perception, Oral Reading Practices, Repeating Practices.

Background

To cope with the trend of globalization, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) has focused on educating individuals with high English communication ability and global mindsets (MEXT, 2003). This trend has accelerated the inclination to expect higher English competence for college seniors to find a job, and recruiters have started using TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) score as an English achievement measure for university students (MEXT, 2003; Chihara & Kato-Otani, 2008). This basically means that students need to mark above certain scores to prove their English ability before they start marketing themselves for the future career

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opportunities. However, most Japanese college students are struggling to mark the required scores on TOEIC, particularly they have an inclination to mark less for the listening part (ETS, 2014). This inclination indicates that identifying an effective pedagogy to teach listening at the college level EFL classes in Japan is necessary to educate individuals with high English competence. This paper explores a theory regarding speech perception (Motor Theory of Speech Perception) that provides insights on how to teach listening,
a currently popular methodology to teach listening: rapid oral reading/repeating practices, and if there are any differences in TOEIC listening test scores among students taking classes with rapid oral reading/repeating practices.

Problem statement

For coping with the recent trend of globalization, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in Japan (MEXT) has set an English education policy that focuses on educating individuals with high English communication abilities and global mindsets (MEXT, 2003). This trend has resulted in some changes in English language education policy in the K-16 levels as well as accelerated the inclination to use TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication) score as an English achievement measure for university students (ETS, 2013). Particularly, students are expected to mark certain scores to prove their English communication competence before they start marketing themselves for the future career opportunities.

However, most Japanese college students mark even lower than 50% on the TOEIC tests and they tend to struggle at the listening part in particular (ETS, 2014). Although there is a room for debates regarding whether the TOEIC test is an appropriate English achievement measure for college students or not, given the prevalence of TOEIC as an English achievement measure, this inclination may signal that identifying an effective pedagogy for the college level EFL classes to help Japanese college students develop English listening skills is an impending issue to educate individuals with high English competence.

To achieve this end, on the contrary to dictation practice, the traditional L2 listening methodology, some scholars identify the efficacy of oral output-based listening pedagogies such as shadowing, oral reading and repeating practices (Tamai, 2008; Kadota, 2010; Kadota, 2012). Given this recent inclination to shed light on output-based listening pedagogies, this paper explores theoretical standpoints of some output-based L2 listening pedagogies such as rapid oral reading and repeating practices. The author also compares and contrasts whether engaging in these practices into the pedagogies may result in the improvement of L2 listening skills by using TOEIC listening score as a measure. The next section explores a theory that explains why and how these output-based listening pedagogies are effective.

Output-based listening pedagogies and theories regarding L2 speech perception

How speech perception (listening comprehension) happens in L2 and how to teach listening have been discussed in the field of SLA for long time. As a result, there has been a growing set of researches exploring the relationships between L2 listening comprehension and speech modification (Chodorow, 1979; Chang & Dunkel, 1992; Hayati, 2010; Zhao, 2011). Among those discussions, some scholars identify that the speech rate, listeners' prior knowledge, and language proficiency are three major factors that influence L2 listening comprehension (Chiang & Dunkel 1992; Zhao, 2011). In particular, speech rate has been considered as an important factor for communication, and slower speech rate is generally considered to significantly influence the degree of L2 listening comprehension among non-native speakers (Flaherty, 1979; Dahl, 1981; Griffiths, 1990 & 1991; Zhao, 2011). Along this idea, if students need to better listen on TOEIC exam, they need to be trained in the way that helps them feel that TOEIC listening's speech rate is slower than the speech rate they are used to listening to.

This relationship between speech rate and L2 speech perception has close connection to Motor Theory of Speech Perception. The theory is a major conceptual framework that explains L2 listening comprehension process, and based on the idea that there is a co-relation between listening comprehension and speech rate (Lieberman & Mattingly, 1985; Bever & Poeppel, 2010; Kadota, 2012). Bever and Poeppel (2010) further identify that L2 speech perception involves the listeners' speech production as "listeners are reconstructuring the articulatory gestures of the speaker, and using those as the trigger for the perception of underlying intended sequence of phones as though they actually occurred acoustically" (p.179). In short, the theory conceptualizes L2 listening as a process in which listeners perceive the speeches in L2 by reconstructuring the phonetic symbols in the speeches in accordance with their speech generating systems. In other words, according to the theory, listeners' speaking ability in L2 such as speech rate, pronunciation, and sentence construction may influence listeners' speech perception ability.

Given the connection between L2 listening skills and their speech production ability including the speech rate, it is possible to assume that students that engage in rapid oral reading and repeating practices that help them better produce speech in L2 should be able to develop better listening skills. Given that rapid oral reading and repeating practices are linked to developing better productive ability (Zhang, 2009), the next section explores if there are any significant differences in TOEIC listening scores between those who engaged in rapid oral reading and repeating practices and those who did not by comparing and contrasting the students' post-semester TOEIC listening scores.

Research method

Participants of the study are 389 college students attending two different higher educational institutions in Western Japan. Students were divided into three different groups, Groups A, B and C. To explore if including in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices influence students' TOEIC listening test scores or not, students were asked to take TOEIC exam after taking the TOEIC preparation classes. Students in Groups A and B enroll at the same institution. Both students in Groups A and B took the TOEIC bridge exam when they first enrolled the institution, and their score ranges are equivalent to TOEIC scores of 400 through 520.

Students in Group A took grammar- and reading-based class once a week for the first semester and dictation-based listening class once a week for the second semester. Group A listening class assigns a recitation assignment once a semester. These students took IP-TOEIC test at the end of the second semester.

Students in Group B took the exact same grammar- and reading-based class once a week, and took once-a-week listening class completely based on rapid oral reading and repeating practices for the second semester. For repeating practices, students work on repeating every sentence in the script after listening to the CDs to confirm the pronunciation. For rapid oral reading practices, students work on reading the listening scripts aloud at the 1.3 times faster speed than the original speed of the CD. This way, students should become able to control their production rate that may influence learners speech recognition skills as Lieberman and Mattingly (1985) indicate in Motor Theory of Speech Perception. In addition to the in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices, the listening class for Group B assigns the larger amounts of recitation assignments than those for Group A. These students took IP-TOEIC test at the end of the second semester.

Students in Group C enroll at the other higher educational institution, and they took once-a-week TOEIC preparation class both for the first and second semesters. This once-a-week TOEIC preparation class covers listening, grammar and reading altogether in the class each semester. When the class covered the listening section, students engaged in rapid oral reading and repeating practices of the listening scripts only in the second semester. Students in Group C took IP-TOEIC test when they first enrolled at the institution and also at the end of both first and second semesters.

Research result/Discussion

Comparing the TOEIC test scores after the second semester shows the differences in the chart below (c.f. Appendix). Although students in both Groups A and B marked the same score range when they first enroll at the institution, their TOEIC scores, particularly the listening

scores, show significant differences. Students in Group B---those who took the class with in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices---mark almost 40 points higher in the listening section than students in Group A---those who did not work on in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices. The comparison between post-semester TOEIC scores of the first and second semesters of Group C also highlights that students tend to mark higher on TOEIC listening section after working on in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices.

This result implies that introducing in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices is more likely to help students mark higher on the TOEIC listening section. Given that the precedent research findings indicate that the score differences larger than 40 points should be considered significant differences (Andrade, 2014), the score differences of Groups A and B in their listening scores are considered significant differences.

This research result is align with the hypothesis that rapid oral reading and repeating practices have a potential for learners to become able to control their L2 production rate, which determines the learners' speech recognition ability (Lieberman & Mattingly, 1985). Given that the dataset is based on test scores and does not reflect students' cognitive shift that they should have experienced during the learning process through rapid oral reading and repeating practices, exploring students' self perception of their changes in speech recognition ability should be helpful to better investigate the co-relationships among speech perception, L2 production rates and in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices.

Conclusion

This paper explore the pedagogical practices based on Motor Theory of Speech Perception that learners' ability to control their L2 production rate influences their speech recognition skills that determine their L2 listening ability by exploring if in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices, which asks learners to accelerate their L2 production rates as a part of the practices, influence students' TOEIC listening scores by comparing test scores of those who did and did not take the in-class oral reading and repeating practices. Both comparisons between Groups A and B, and the first and second semesters of Group C indicate that those who took TOEIC after the in-class oral rapid reading and repeating practices mark higher in the TOEIC listening section than those who did not.

Given that this research is based on the datasets solely with test scores, it should be helpful to qualitatively investigate how the listening scores went up through in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices by exploring the transformation in learners' self-perception of their L2 oral production rate, which is considered as a determinant of their speech recognition skills. It also should be noted that while Group B students spent the entire semester on in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices, Group C 2nd semester students spent some sessions in the semester for the same practices. Exploring the frequency of these practices and its influences on TOEIC listening score should be very helpful to provide insights on the effective TOEIC listening pedagogies.

In sum, given that this research is leaning toward exploring the pedagogies based on a theory solely with qualitative analysis, qualitatively researching on the co-relationships between L2 production rate and speech recognition skills, as well as exploring how the frequency of in-class rapid oral reading and repeating practices impacts TOEIC listening scores are the further avenues for investigation.

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Appendix: Comparison of class average points of post-semester TOEIC scores

	Listening Scores
Group A (without in-class oral reading and repeating practices, listening class was completely dictation-based)	241.1
Group B (the entire second semester spent on in-class oral reading and repeating practices)	280.9
Group C (Post-1st Semester TOEIC test average, without in-class oral reading and repeating practices)	275.1
Group C (Post-2nd Semester, with some class sessions spent on in-class oral reading and repeating practices)	286.9