

Aspects of the Acquisition of English

—The Four Skills—

(I)

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A rather different approach to the problem of acquisition of knowledge has been characteristic of rationalist speculation about mental processes. The rationalist approach holds that beyond the peripheral processing mechanisms, there are innate ideas and principles of various kinds that determine the form of the acquired knowledge in what may be a rather restricted and highly organized way. A condition for innate mechanisms to become activated is that appropriate stimulation be presented. (Noam Chomsky *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* 1976, p. 48)

Introduction

This paper is intended for presenting theoretical discussion of the linguistic and pedagogical background to the acquisition of English, emphasis being laid on the four skills — listening, speaking, reading, and writing — supported by physiological as well as linguistic and psychological findings made in recent years.

The mainstream of the discussion is derived from years of actual teaching experiences in the classroom where the writer has been struggling in search of more effective teaching methods that are better suited to a group of students, whom the writer is responsible for guiding and helping in their study of English.

Neglected Area of the Four Skills

It is frequently pointed out that the teaching of listening and speaking skills is the area which has been neglected most. The level of each student's ability in these skills varies greatly according to his differing academic background. Of the four skills, the above-mentioned two are least practiced and developed among high school students before they are coming to the university. The preparation for entrance examination prevents high school English teachers from allowing precious class time to be spent on speaking practice, much less listening.

At the time when foreign language study served mainly for the purpose of acquiring knowledge and information or of pursuing the study of literary works through the form of written language, the practice of listening and speaking was mostly disregarded. Moreover, due to the limited means of transportation, most of the people were unable to travel to foreign countries, and consequently teaching English as a means of communication gained no significance. In the majority of the foreign language classrooms, the acquisition of reading and writing skills was stressed and the students devoted themselves to translating the foreign language into the native language, and vice versa.

During the war-torn years, English lessons were placed under a ban and use of the language was prohibited in public. With the end of the War, however, the study of the spoken form of English came to be considered inevitable, which led to shifting of the teaching methodology to meet the requirement of the practical application of the speaking skill. Such teaching methods as the Direct Method, the Aural Method, and the Audio-lingual Method were introduced and adopted with great enthusiasm, prompted by the rapid development of language laboratory and other audio-visual teaching devices with tape-recorded materials of various kinds. Chanting of the pattern-drills filled the classrooms and English songs were heard over the radio throughout the country.

For the past few decades, the practice of having native-speaker instructors teach oral English lessons has been widely adopted by high schools as well as by universities all over the country. Throughout the history of English education here in Japan, from the days of Hearn, Palmer, and Hornby to the present-day, foreign language-instructors have played an important role in introducing the way of life and thinking as well as the manners and customs of their countries in addition to their regular classroom teaching. We have to acknowledge with appreciation the fact that they have contributed immensely to the foreign language teaching with their sincere effort to bridge over the gap between the linguistic, cultural, and social divergences of their countries and ours for the past generations, and we believe that they will do a great deal more in the future years.

Learning English as a means of communication has now become an accepted end in itself, as more and more people go abroad every year for the purpose of tourism, study or business. Then, how to learn to be fluent in speaking English is at the heart of the question. The more important question is where and when to begin and who is to be responsible for teaching the spoken form of English. As it is, not much practice is being done in the compulsory English lessons during the freshman and sophomore years at the

university. For they are generally looked upon as a reinforcement as well as a preparation for the coming junior and senior years when a great deal of reading is involved in an effort to accumulate information from text and reference books which are often written in English. Thus, apart from those who major in English, the majority of university students do not have much of an opportunity to be exposed to real spoken language pattern of English.

It is no wonder that there are a number of private language institutes mushrooming even in remote regions of the country. They often enjoy the reputation of having native speakers of English as instructors many of whom hold an M. A. either in TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) or in TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language), adopting enthusiastically Aural-Oral Approach, the Direct Method, the Audio-lingual Method, or even experimenting with the recent invention such as Community Language Learning, the Silent Way, and Suggestopedia, and taking full advantage of the latest conveniences such that can facilitate the students' learning ability.

Yet, the listening skill had not been developed as compared to the other three, and the situation has remained very much the same till recent years. It is partly because of the fleeting, elusive nature of the spoken language that the student usually finds listening most difficult. As for the part of the teacher as well, it is the least-known and still poorly exploited field of study in the foreign-language teaching methodology. For one thing, there has been no established way to analyze or to evaluate the listening skill, except to judge from the speaking ability which is the resultant product of listening comprehension.

In the case of the other three skills, it is easy for the teacher to detect the student's errors. On the contrary, with the listening skill, it is hard to find exactly how much the student can comprehend or where the difficulty lies. Another problem on the part of the teacher is the lack of knowledge on the process of comprehension. As Rivers (1976, p. 131) puts it, "Speech perception, it must be admitted, is a subject about which very little is known with any certainty." Indeed, to many of us, the process of listening comprehension still remains as a somewhat mysterious, ambiguous performance of the brain. Some linguists believe that it is the reverse operation of that of speaking, though there is not much experimental evidence to prove it. Still others maintain that it is a complex act of decoding and recoding of a message, relevant to syntax and semantics, with immediate memory playing an important part. Chomsky (1976) speaks of the internalized system of

rules which underlies the act of listening and speaking.

In the recent study, both linguists and psychologists have made a number of important discoveries on some aspects of the nature of listening comprehension, which the writer intends to discuss later at length with detailed information. Yet, there is a great deal more which is still unknown to us. The process of comprehension cannot be brought into conscious awareness, for it is impossible to observe the process operating in the human mind. However, it is possible if the process is inferred from observable performance.

The Function of the Brain

An extensive research on the two hemispheres of the human brain and their functions (Slobin 1979) reveals that, on the contrary to animals', the right and left halves of the nervous system in human beings are asymmetrical in both structure and function. Portions of the left hemisphere of the brain which are specialized for language functions are much larger than those of the right hemisphere and mature later than other parts of the brain. This proves that they are of relatively recent evolutionary origin. The demands of language processing have contributed to a "division of labor" between the hemispheres. Ordinarily, cerebral organization completes when the child becomes about four. If any brain damage to the left hemisphere occurs after this period, it causes a fatal language disturbance.

There are biological findings related to the function of the human brain. Taylor (1976) suggests that during the "critical period" — while the brain is still *plastic* — which is believed to last until the early teens, the child can readily acquire the language skills. After this period, however, it becomes much harder to acquire language, as the evidence of the so-called "wolf" and "attic" children shows. A girl who was abandoned in her early childhood and raised by wolves in the woods without being exposed to human beings did not learn to speak human language until she was found in her late childhood. Even after receiving a special training, she acquired only limited amount of language. Another example is reported by Fromkin et al. (1974) about a girl who was kept in diapers until she became eleven years old, and had managed to acquire the speaking ability barely equivalent to that of a two-year-old normal child, after being placed under the special program sponsored by a university for a few years.

Lenneberg (1967) reports that the mentally retarded children can be taught with slow

progress until they reach their early teens. After that, no matter how much training they may receive, they remain at the stage where their mental language acquisition ability stops and speak only a sort of baby-talk forever after.

Nature of Language Acquisition

Language is the primary mode of communication that human beings have at their disposal. The possession of language distinguishes humans from other species of animals, and permits them to express their thoughts. As Stevick (1976, p. 3) says, "Language is the special treasure of our race. It depends on what we call the mind, but it comes out of the entire person. It is necessary, however, to look into the field of physical organisms with which the mind of man uses." The process of language acquisition is a complex, yet-to-be-known field of study, mainly because of the multiple variables which enter into play.

Psycholinguists study language as a human activity, which is a sub-field of the general area of cognitive psychology. As the study of language is relevant to the study of acquisition of foreign language, so is the study of the basic processes of acquisition, comprehension, and production of language relevant to the cause of advance teaching methodologies. In teaching foreign language, if we consider the ways in which both languages — the native language and the target language — are similar, it will help promote the organization of more efficient methodology. For each language in the world has its universal characteristics as well as its diversities.

One important fact that concerns the nature of language is that the external form per se does not convey the meaning. Rather, the speaker encodes his thoughts into an external form, and only when the listener decodes or translates that form back into a representation of the meaning, is he able to comprehend the message. Language, therefore, can be said to be constituted of these two codes — external and internal — in addition to the set of rules or procedures underlying them, with which an unlimited number of spontaneous sentences can be produced. The external code is supported mainly through a structured phonological system, whereas the internal code functions on a semantic cognitive level. Language serves as a means to relate these two codes, except that the internal code does not necessarily take the form of external code as language, but it is possible to exist by itself. In other words, we can think without speaking — without the help of language. The external form of representation in the phonological system and the internal form

representend in a semantic system are brought together through the syntactic system.

The study of language acquisition has been influenced by the theory of transformational generative grammar. Chomsky (1976) maintains that children are born with universal knowledge with which they can determine the grammatical structure of language. This represents the rationalist hypothesis which contrasts with the empiricist hypothesis. Empiricists claim that linguistic knowledge comes from experience, while rationalists advocate that innate ideas and principles determine the form in which acquired knowledge is organized in a person's grammar.

The set of rules which was mentioned earlier is the aspect of grammar with which we are able to construct meaningful sentences and also comprehend the speech of other people or detect errors when they occur. Linguistic competence can be referred to as grammar, while performance refers to the psychological processes which involve the actual use of grammar in the acquisition and production of language. The theory of this linguistic performance is the chief concern of psycholinguists. The difference between the standpoint of linguists and that of psychologists is that the former deals with the theory of language — the structure of the phonological, syntactic, and semantic systems, the latter, the theory of knowledge and processes.

Language is a system which operates on different levels and with phonemes, morphemes, words, and sentences. The knowledge of the system enables both the listener and the speaker to communicate with each other, that is, receiving and generating a message or information. With the storage of a *priori* information on phonemes and words, the rules for forming morphemes from phonemes, and sentences from words, the brain can continuously process the speech input and program the speech output.

The process of decoding is done at first with the listener receiving the sound waves which includes acoustic information originated from the speaker, followed by the reconstruction of the representation of the message. The speech sound — phone — is articulated by the organs of the speaker, traveling through the air in the form of sound waves, reaching finally to the ear of the listener. The speech sound is normally studied in the following three separate stages, under the categories of articulatory phonetics or physiological phonetics (articulation), acoustic phonetics or physical phonetics (sound waves), and auditory phonetics (reception by the ear). Listening involves each stage of the above-mentioned processes. If the vocal sound is not articulated correctly, in terms of pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, and loudness, it is impossible for the listener to understand

what has been said. Even if the articulation is correctly made, a certain noise disturbance may hinder the listener from receiving the speech sound correctly and accurately. Finally, provided that the message reaches the listener in a perfect form, if his auditory organ is defective, it would be impossible for him to perceive the message. After the perception of the message, however, if the listener's ability to comprehend the message is not sufficient, communication would be impossible. All these factors involved in communication must be taken into consideration when listening comprehension is being taught. The language teacher must be quick enough to trace the source of faults when they occur, and correct them accordingly.

First Language Acquisition

The earliest research on first language acquisition was initiated at the end of the eighteenth century, but it was not until the latter half of this century that the systematic study of the aspects of child language acquisition was taken up with great enthusiasm by either linguists or psychologists. Although differences between first language acquisition and that of foreign language are apparent, many foreign-language teachers have looked into the resultant findings in order to apply them to their own field of study. The process of the child acquiring his mother tongue is a natural one, whereas the adult learning his foreign language requires conscious effort with systematic instructions and practice drills. The most significant difference lies in the fact that the complete development of the cognitive function of the child's language acquisition does not reach a formal operational period until he becomes eleven to fifteen years old, a point at which he can define concepts and reason logically, systematically, and symbolically.

According to Piaget (1967), cognitive development can be divided into four stages. These stages, consisting of the periods from zero-language at birth to its full-fledged form at the age of approximately fifteen, are considered universal, and the sequence for the development of language as well. At the first stage (from birth to two years), when the child observes objects, his cognition is limited to the actual entities and the reaction to the presence is limited only to its manipulation. At the second stage (from age two to seven), when the child observes an object or an action, the association that results becomes an integral part of the language acquisition process. He can differentiate between an object and its internal representation. At an early period, his thinking and use of language are egocentric, and he attaches private meaning to words and signs, not knowing

the fact that they bear other meanings in terms of social context. His thinking is centered on one relationship at a time. At the third stage (from age seven to eleven), the child can vary two or more relationships simultaneously, though his thinking cannot go further than the concrete qualities of objects and their immediate presence. Only by the time when he reaches the final stage, at the fourth stage (from age eleven to fifteen), is he able to have his mental processes developed to a point where abstract thinking becomes possible and he is now capable of hypothesis-testing. The weight of the brain of a new-born baby is only a quarter of that of an adult, and becomes fully matured by the time he reaches his early teens. This goes to show that there is more opportunity for language acquisition to meet its full potential.

The child acquires knowledge that makes it possible for him to go beyond the collection of sentences he has heard, comprehending and speaking arbitrary variety of new utterances. It is this fact that leads to the belief that the child possesses an ability to form a system of rules, whereby he can extend a limited number of sentences to the capacity to understand and produce an unlimited number of messages. One of the central problems of psycholinguistics has been to understand the nature and development of this capacity.

Now psycholinguistic research has moved from early attempts to verify the existence of underlying grammatical structures to studies of how linguistic knowledge is used in the processes of listening and speaking. Since the knowledge and the use of the knowledge are interdependent, the emphasis should be laid on the structural aspects of language as well as the behavioral aspects of language use, both of which are rule-governed. The current study is to relate structural rules and behavioral rules, i. e., the combination of the theoretical work of linguists and the empirical investigations of psychologists in terms of the functional view of language. Our chief concern is to what extent is the linguistic capacity, which is a biological endowment of our species, developed in the child, after having established that systematic structures and processes underlying language use. This capacity relates to the ways in which language interacts with other aspects of cognition such as thought, memory, and mental development. As the considerations of the nature of mind and behavior can contribute to an understanding of human language itself, so can study of linguistic phenomena cast light on the nature of mind and its development.

The environment of the child acquiring his first language is in sharp contrast to the environment of the thirteen-year-old Japanese student learning his alphabet in his classroom

with no access to the real situation of the language use. In the case of first language acquisition, the child is exposed to the language constantly spoken in his everyday life, where he can acquire the language without conscious effort. The important fact is that he has plenty of opportunity to build visual images through the process of observing people around him speaking and acting or by playing with his peers.

Foreign Language Acquisition

In the process of first language acquisition, as is discussed previously, the child is exposed to its spoken form first, then learns to imitate speaking, eventually to develop the skill of reading and writing in later years, which normally begins when he enters kindergarden or primary school. On the contrary, in the case of foreign language acquisition, the process is reversed. In ordinary Japanese schools, apart from those founded by certain religious groups where the students are taught English as early as in kindergarden or in the first year of primary school, the students start their English lesson when they enter junior high school. At first, they are introduced to a written form of the language, the alphabet. This may be true with many other countries in the world where English is taught as a foreign language.

For the thirteen-year-old school child, it will be extremely difficult to listen to English which is spoken at the normal speed in the sequence of a stream of sounds for the first time in his life. From the psychological point of view, there can be found some factors other than the mere lack of experiences which prevent him from opportunities for listening and speaking practice. The student who is on the verge of transition from his childhood to adolescence will find it frustrating to concentrate on listening to the materials whose contents are far too inferior to his knowledge in the native language, and that often produces a negative attitude to listening practice. Another is the boring repetition drill he has to go through at the early stage of speaking practice. The student also finds it frustrating not to be able to express himself properly and freely in English when he can do it so perfectly well in his native language. He feels irritated with his own childish manner of speech and often abandons the attempt. Moreover, if the teacher tries to correct him each time he makes any minor mistakes — usually out of enthusiasm to help the student, it discourages him from further attempt. It must be stressed that the teacher must not seek for a mathematical correctness and perfection from the student. Rather, errors of the student should be considered as a passing stage of learning, and not

as a fatal defect of his individual learning ability.

Especially for the university student, it is almost painful to have to listen to someone talking about what she or he has eaten for breakfast that morning, for example, when he is more interested in such sophisticated subject as music, sports, or jobs. It is only natural that he soon gets tired of listening to the story of John and Mary, parroting everyday dialogue or cliché, speaking only of weather and daily events, or asking the directions. It is not the language that matters, but the topic that makes him disinterested or creates offensive feelings toward spoken English lesson.

It must be stressed here that the materials for listening and speaking practice should be carefully chosen and prepared so as to arouse interest among the students or to meet their specific needs. Some students, even though their scores on reading and writing skills are high, show extreme dislike to actual speaking practice. They sometimes even refuse to speak. The reason for this resistance is the fear of making mistakes in front of their fellow students. In other classes, they may be regarded as well-learned, respectable beings. In English classroom, with their awkward pronunciation, they become the scorn of their classmates, thus feeling inferior. It is important for the teacher to take all these aspects of learner's psychology into consideration when the student is practicing to speak.

If these students had had an opportunity to be exposed to the spoken English in their early school years and to be able to learn it as a means of communication, they would not have to struggle or detest it. They also would have found that through the acquisition of spoken English, they could have made friends with the people who speak the same language, and to know their way of life and thinking, which is no less important than learning to speak the language.

Early Initial Lesson

As far as the development of listening skill is concerned — and for that matter, speaking skill as well — the present writer is firmly convinced that it is most desirable if the initial English lesson be given at the pre-school age or as part of the primary school education. This does not necessarily mean the full scale language teaching. The main strategy at this point should be limited to having the child exposed to the phonological version of the language, aiming at listening to English sound and its rhythm. Being able to differentiate the sound of the native language and that of the foreign language will prompt

the child to familiarize himself with the spoken form, which will eventually enable him to produce the same sound with little difficulty. Especially in a somewhat playful environment, the child can learn the language with much ease, or even with enthusiasm, if tactful assistance from the teacher and appropriate learning materials — including plenty of visual aids and songs of a favorite kind — are available. The pre-school age child can absorb practically anything and everything that is presented in sound accompanied by visual objects.

Children are born with instinctive, natural language acquisition device (Chomsky 1976). Even a few months after birth, differences in a child's utterance such as a cry for food and other needs can be detected by a careful observation of parents. A friend of the writer who is a linguist reports that his six-month-old daughter utters sounds similar to "Mammy" when she is hungry but murmurs "Da, Da, Da," when she is playful. This can be interpreted as her cognition of identity: mother as an instrument of the function of satisfying physical needs; father, on the other hand, as a expression of playful activity.

Teaching Listening Comprehension

We have profited so much from the recent discoveries on the nature of the process of listening comprehension made by linguists in cooperation with psychologists. The teacher's thorough knowledge on the theoretical level is of vital importance to the practical application in language teaching.

There are two aspects of communicative competence, namely, the receptive and the productive. Listening which is a receptive competence requires linguistic knowledge — an ability to perceive a stream of sounds and distinguish phonological classification of each phoneme and then integrate them into semantic units, eventually to understand the meaning of what has been said. It is clear that, without the acquisition of a phonological system to begin with, the development of communicative competence is quite impossible. More precisely, the process of listening involves first the perception of a continuous stream of sounds, then the identification of the elements in the stream, which are actually segments of the message or information having a distinctive structure and are parts of a constituent of a more extensive organized system. The most difficult of all is this structuring of segments in relation to other segments, which have been already heard and apprehended, and have to be retained in order to construct the complete and meaningful

message or information. The act of comprehension, therefore, is a constant analysis and synthesis of ongoing speech. Immediate memory, which is a short-term storage mechanism, is a vital factor in listening comprehension. If the listener can not retain in his immediate memory what has preceded, he will not be able to relate the consequence.

Linguists are engaged in the discussion of the structure of language — speech phonology, semantics, and syntax — while psychologists are studying the acquisition of language in the processes of speech comprehension or perception, speech act, and memory — underlying stored knowledge and abilities in order to learn language — from the careful study of overt behavior. The behavior of speech derives from thoughts to words, whereas the behavior of listening goes from words to thoughts. The knowledge of language which is stored in the human brain must be put to use momentarily in order to communicate. Speech behavior is temporal and is a series of linguistic acts performed sequentially and processed in time so as to transmit messages. Underlying these messages are the knowledge of grammar, thoughts patterns, social conventions, etc. These are atemporal. The relation between the atemporal stored knowledge and the processes of its temporal use — going from thought to speech — at the level of each sentence poses complex philosophical problems related to listening comprehension. The meaning of a sentence is not just a string of words, but an idea which gives birth to that string and determines its temporal sequence. This temporal sequence in itself does not give meaning to a sentence, rather, meaning comes from the knowledge of how rules of order are to be interpreted in the language. The meanings of the sentences come from a cognitive activity which involves both knowledge of word meanings and knowledge of particular linguistic conventions or rules, that is, the grammar of English.

Listening skill once was thought to be a passive skill, and was ignored in many of the textbooks which were published prior to 1970. On the contrary, the process of listening is an active performance. Cognitive nature of listening involves perception which is based on internalized knowledge of the rules of the language. The process of listening begins with the student recognizing at first a stream of sounds which consists of units of grammatical elements which can be comprehend if they are already learnt previously and stored in his memory, i. e., in his passive vocabulary. First, the student may hear only certain sound units which are familiar to him, yet it may not be possible for him to attribute the function of sound unit in relation to other units in terms of syntax. In order to construct an intelligible message out of what he is listening, it is not enough to

be able to recognize only certain phonemes. It is necessary for him to hold segments which he has already identified in his immediate memory and then readjust the interpretation of earlier segments in accordance with the final message so as to understand the whole picture of what he is listening. Listening, therefore, is not a passive but an active process of constructing within him a certain message from a stream of sounds. It requires phonological, semantic, and syntactic knowledge of the language. It is obvious that the grammatical knowledge of the language is fundamental to developing listening skill.

As the writer has described earlier, the process of the speaker encoding a message and the listener decoding it involves complex physiological as well as linguistic and psychological variables. Also, social, emotional, and physical factors are characteristics which deserve special attention. In actual teaching, it is necessary to take it into consideration that there is a limit to the human capacity to absorb, process, and comprehend whatever one is listening at one given time and for him to store it in his immediate or short-term memory. That is to say, the amount of information given at a certain time should be so arranged that the student will not have too much difficulty in comprehending it. Here, it must be pointed out that there is fifty percent redundancy in the spoken form of English (Rivers 1981), which makes it possible for the listener to absorb information without asking again and again to repeat the same passage when he may miss part of it. One of the reasons why it is so difficult for the listener — sometimes even for the native speaker of the language — to thoroughly understand a well-prepared lecture or speech is that there is very little, if any, redundancy.

If the student can be trained to recognize such elements as syntactic relationships, sequence of words, combinations of sounds, and conversational tags and formulas which are peculiar to English, his ability to anticipate probabilities of occurrences of such elements increases and consequently the amount of information he has to process at one given time will be reduced considerably. The background knowledge on the topic he previously acquired in his native language can also help to reduce perceptual difficulties. Gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice — such elements as to show degrees of emphasis, emotional stress, etc. further aids in comprehending situational dialogues. For the student to build up the frame for anticipating the occurrences of such elements mentioned above would be the foundation for successful development of listening skill.

Increase in information content, the high rate of speed at which the message is transmitted, and the short length and the less number of pauses in the message are the

elements which decreases the student's ability to comprehend accurately. Judging from the results of the listening comprehension tests which the writer has given to the students in the past, it is evident that even if information content increases, the slow rate of speed compensates for the difficulty. Even when the message is conveyed at high speed, adequate length of pause given at frequent intervals would assist to better comprehension. Since these three factors obviously compensate one another in listening comprehension, the special care must be taken on the part of the teacher so as to reduce the load on the student. Among other things, a pause is a decisive clue in supplying an opportunity for the student to organize his thoughts as he listens. Another important factor which assists the student in comprehension is reasoning power. In case the student's linguistic knowledge fails him to conceive the meaning of some words in the passage, he can depend on his ability to judge from the context the general meaning of the whole message.

The differences between listening and the other three skills lie in the fact that in the process of listening, rapid retrieval of the previous memory is required of the listener as the language is spoken at a certain rate of speed. There is no alternative or choice on the part of the listener as to the rate of speed, the variety of vocabulary, and the style of speech or register. In other words, he is totally at the mercy of the speaker. In speaking, on the other hand, if the speaker detects that the listener is having trouble understanding his message, he may slow down, repeat or use another expression so as to clarify the meaning. In reading as well, the reader can always go back and reread, or even refer to the dictionary if it is necessary, whenever he has any difficulty or wants to reconfirm what he believes he has already understood. The writer is at liberty to spend any amount of time he wishes in writing, choosing vocabulary or style, and rewriting any number of times in order to convey exactly what he intends to.

The difficulty which the student must first overcome while learning listening comprehension is to discriminate sounds. Since each language has its peculiar characteristics, unless he can familiarize himself with the distinctive English phonic patterns, he will not be able to perceive utterances. This is where the Japanese students who are studying English as a foreign language encounter greater difficulty than those whose native language is one of the members of the Indo-European language system. There are several factors to this disadvantage. For one thing, the phonetic and syntactic systems between English and Japanese are so far apart that it takes much longer and requires more endeavor for

the Japanese students to familiarize themselves with. With regard to vowels, there are five main vowels in Japanese, whereas there are more than twelve — some scholars claim that there are sixteen — vowels in English most of which are quite unfamiliar to the Japanese. As for syntactic differences, although English is a language which originally was a synthetic language, its inflections went through drastic changes during the period of Middle English and now it is considered an analytic language with no case endings except for the possessive case. Instead, the word order determines the cases: the subject is followed by the verb, the verb being transitive complete, the object follows immediately after it; while the verb being intransitive incomplete, the complement follows after it. In Japanese, the word order is in reverse: after the subject, the object or the complement comes before the verb. When it comes to listening comprehension, this difference produces great difficulty for the Japanese students. It has already been pointed out that we have limited ability in retaining in our aural memory what we have heard at one given time. In the process of listening, the Japanese student who does not have enough experience in listening to English automatically anticipates the object as soon as he hears the subject word. Instead of the anticipated object, when he hears the main verb followed by an object or object clause, often including long adjectival clauses or subordinate clauses, it is impossible for him to follow an ongoing speech. Moreover, when there are quite a few words the meaning of which are beyond his comprehension, his cognitive ability stops and he eventually loses clues to aid in comprehension.

Only after a long, tedious practice of listening, will the student be able to familiarize himself with the distinctive phonetic patterns and to recognize them as clues to comprehension. There are certain phonic distinctions which the student can rely on for decoding. One of them is intonation. Rising or falling intonation gives a clue to determine whether that particular sentence is a mere comment or a question requiring a response. Others are stress and emotional expressions such as those that indicate doubt, surprise, pleasure or anger. In reality, communication cannot be done without some facial expressions or gestures which are indispensable aids to listening comprehension.

Poor ability to comprehend may be caused by weakness of concentration, which is attributed to short auditory memory. To correct this problem, adequate questions relevant to the theme of the story or the message that the student has just heard should be asked before he loses the memory so that he may be able to retain the direct association of the sounds and its image. Training to build auditory images of what he is hearing enables

the student to directly comprehend foreign language without constantly interpreting it into his native language, and consequently automatic recognition will become possible.

It is noteworthy that returnees who have spent their childhood in foreign countries where English is spoken, even after having lost contact with native speakers for a considerable period of time, retain the ability to listen and understand the language. Those who are either too young or too old to be able to really acquire the language — age brackets under four or over fifteen — tend to lose their ability in speaking very quickly, though they can still comprehend what they hear. This may indicate that receptive and productive competence, i. e., active and passive perception competence are affected by different influences.

Listening skill ought to be considered as a primary importance in teaching English and treated and dealt with as such. The survey shows that in the case of actual communication among adults, one spends forty-five percent of one's time for listening, whereas thirty percent is spent for speaking, sixteen percent reading, and only nine percent writing (Rivers 1978). Communication involves at least two people, or sometimes more. It means that communication will not take place unless one can comprehend what others are saying. As is often the case with people traveling abroad, it is not because of their lack of speaking skill but because of their inability to listen and comprehend that prevents them from communicating freely. It is apparent that listening skill and speaking skill supplement and complement each other. Hence listening skill is the basis for the rest of the skills, since all the four language skills are based on the same language system.

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