Listening Strategy Training:
# An Attempt in an Intermediate-Level Class in Study Abroad Program

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1. Good afternoon everyone. In the first presentation presented by Takeda-sensei, he presented his observation that was made from the level 4 low class, and Tobaru-sensei presented her findings from the level 3 high class. Now I will present about the listening strategy training that was conducted in the level 4 high class in the Critical Language Scholarship Japan Institute in summer 2013, which was hosted at Himeji Dokkyou University. I will be calling it CLS throughout this presentation, and it is a full scholarship program funded by the US Department of State, where 29 students from across the country participated.

Application
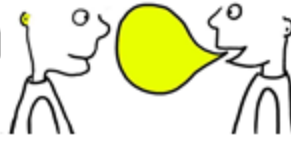
- Enactment
- Report their findings from *"Action!"*
- Discussion on Cultural Topics
- Narrative Practice
- Conversation Practice

GOAL

To become good reporters/listeners

2. As the previous presenters explained earlier, various tasks were done in the application session, which was conducted every day in the first period during the program. There, students reenacted the action, reported their findings and observation they made from "Action!" and also discussed about cultural differences as well as similarities. Each class had different objections as their level differed. For example, the goal for the Level 4 low class which their level ranged from intermediate low to mid based on the OPI score, was to increase their skill of narrating. We mainly did conversation practice in the class I taught which was Level 4 high, where the students' level ranged from intermediate mid to high.

Obviously, there needs to be both a speaker and a listener for a conversation to work. So in order for the conversation to be built successfully, we set a goal for the students to become good speakers, or reporters since they were reporting their findings from "Action!", as well as to become good listeners.

Findings

- **Good Reporter ≠ Good Listener**
- Good Listener = Difficult goal to achieve

Common Characteristics Observed
- Quietly listening
- Lack of head nods
- Lack of vocalization
- → Lack of Interest

3. However, what I found while observing the class was that even though students at the intermediate level had a pretty good skill at reporting, their listening behavior did not resemble that of a native Japanese speaker, which made the conversation they were having in Japanese proceed in an awkward way.

   So although we set a goal for the students to become good reporters as well as good listeners, we found that the latter goal seemed to be a lot more difficult to achieve than the former one.

   The common characteristics that were observed from my students were that they were often times just quietly listening to the report, without nodding their head or vocalizing. This could have a potential risk for the NSs to perceive it as if the students are not interested in what the NSs are saying.

   It is important to state here that there are individual differences in listening behaviors, and I am not necessarily saying that these characteristics are wrong. Some people don't nod or use vocalize as much compared to others, based on their personality or individual preferences. Some may purposely choose to keep quiet, as it could convey a specific message to the speaker such as "This conversation is boring" or "I want to end this conversation soon."
   However, in the situation that the students were practicing in, those were not the messages that they wanted to convey to the speaker.

GOAL

To be good reporter/ENGAGED LISTENER

4. After this finding, we emphasized more on the goal to become good listeners, engaged
   listeners to be more specific, and worked to improve this skill during the program.

Importance of Teaching
Japanese Listening Behavior

- Reflects the importance of **consideration** and **cooperation** in Japanese society (Kogure, 2007)
- Both listeners and speakers work to make the conversation work
- 聞き上手 = Valued skill to have in Japan

5. Now I would like to explain why it is important to teach Japanese listening behavior.

Japanese listening behavior is conducted in a way to show consideration and cooperation, which is considered to be a very important value in Japanese society. So it becomes important to teach these skills to the students if they really want to be assimilated and accepted into Japanese culture.

The term *aizuchi*, originally comes from the definition of the alternating strikes of a hammer by a blacksmith and his apprentice when making a 刀, as shown in the picture. We can see here that it is important for both of them to work together to create rhythm and harmony. The same concept applies in the Japanese communication style, in which both the listener and the speaker need to work together to make the conversation work. Also, as the term 聞き上手 exist and is commonly used in Japan, it is considered to be a very valued skill to have.

Although the importance of being 聞き上手 has been known in Japanese culture, it seems like very few textbooks, (one of it being なかま,) actually incorporate a section for it, and the lack of materials is often why it is not reflected in the teaching plan. What the majority of the materials usually focus on is interpretive and comprehension listening training. Therefore, we thought it would be a great opportunity to help enhance this culturally defined skill in CLS since the program was set up to be a culture-heavy study abroad program.

Difficulties for Acquiring Listening Behaviors

1. Not knowing the **basic characteristics** of the cross-cultural listening behaviors
2. Not knowing how to incorporate **nonverbal behaviors**
3. Tendency to **transfer their L1 listening behavior** rules
4. Not enough input and output in **JFL classroom settings**
5. Not knowing when to use what **types** of *aizuchi*

6. Now why was it so difficult for my students to become good listeners?
   I will discuss 5 main reasons that could explain the reason based on the studies that have been conducted on Japanese communication styles. After discussing the difficulties, I would like to explain what we tried to do to help enhance students' engaged listening skill.

Not knowing the basic characteristics of the cross-cultural listening behaviors

☐ **Maynard (1990)**

Japanese listener's responses such as brief comments and head nods occur **far more frequently** than American-English speakers

7. The first difficultly I will talk about is from not knowing the basic characteristic of the cross cultural listening behaviors.

   In Maynard's study in 1990, she found that Japanese listener's responses such as brief comments, aizuchi and head nods occur far more frequently, about three times more when compared to American-English speakers, and can be concluded that those listening behaviors are characteristically Japanese in contrast with American English.

   In the case of my students, many of them did not know that it is a fact that Japanese listeners use *aizuchi* far more frequently compared to American listeners, even if they said they realized some listening behavior differences during their stay in Japan. For them, they thought listening quietly shows respect, and that the frequent use of back channeling disrupts the speaker, which is often true in the case of an American-English conversation. That is why they were listening quietly, but they started to change or at least tried to change their behavior after learning that in Japanese conversation, the usage of frequent *aizuchi* actually shows more respect than listening quietly in many cases.

Not being able to incorporate nonverbal behaviors

☐ **Kogure (2007)**

Japanese people tend to fill in the silence with **nonverbal behaviors** so that interactional exchange will still continue in the silence

nod

8. Another difference that students often didn't know is that Japanese people tend to fill in the silence with nonverbal behaviors such as nodding and smiling, which Kogure showed in his study in 2007. Based on his study, this is done by Japanese people so that interactional exchange will still continue in silence, which will maintain the flow of the conversation.

Transferring their L1 listening behavior rules

☐ **Ishida (2005)**

For Japanese Learners: ウン/head nods = agreement

For Native Speakers:　ウン/head nods = listening

→Learners failed to notice the double track meaning of ウン, since they were applying their own mannerism from their L1

ウンウン　それでね・・・

9. The next point I would like to address is the difficulty that is associated by learners from transferring their L1 listening behavior rules. I have already discussed about this issue briefly, that my students chose to listen quietly because they were applying what would be appropriate based on their knowledge of their American-English listening style.

Ishida's study in 2005 specifically looked into the usage of the *aizuchi* "ウン"、the closest English equivalent being something like "yeah, I see" and also the action of nodding that comes along with it. He had both learners and NSs watch the same short video of Japanese conversation that contained "ウン" and head nods. Here, more than half of the Japanese learners judged that the listener was agreeing and that was why he was saying "ウン" and nodding his head, while none of the native Japanese speakers offered the interpretation of agreeing. They said the listener was saying "ウン" and nodding his head, simply to show that he was listening to the speaker, which was the correct interpretation for the situation they watched in the video.

Ishida's finding was observed in my class as well. Some of my students did not know the double track meaning of ウン, and was only aware of its interpretation as an agreement. So they only used it when they were agreeing to what the reporter was saying, where else for NSs it is often time used to show that they are listening, even if they are not agreeing to what the speaker is saying.

Not enough input and output in JFL classroom settings

☐ Hatasa (2007)

- Learners are simply not receiving enough input/output in JFL classroom settings

- Most common function of input/output: agreement, listening, and understanding
→Exposed to limited variation

10. Another possible reason to why students showed difficulty was simply because they did not receive much input on Japanese listening behavior and didn't have much opportunity to practice it prior to CLS, even though all of the students had at least 2 years of Japanese learning in the US at a university or higher level. The fact that not enough input and output is provided in JFL classroom setting was revealed by Hatasa's study in 2007. She found that students were mostly only provided input of agreement, listening, and understanding by the instructor, and that those were mainly the ones that the students were able to use as well. The reason why the instructors only provided these types of input is probably due to the teacher's role in the classroom, where they are encouraged to provide more positive feedback to the students so that they could create an environment that helps students to speak out in class.

Not knowing when to use what types of *aizuchi*

☐ Miyata and Nisisawa (2007)

- Many aizuchi are inserted in the middle of the primary speaker's utterance in Japanese, a placement extremely rare in English.

- Some *aizuchi* are only possible to use in utterance-final position, such as そうですね,なるほど,やっぱり

11. Another struggle that my students had was that they did not know when to use what types of aizuchi, and this was also a struggle for me when I was teaching because, I myself, do not know exactly at which timing I'm nodding my head or saying ウン and other various *aizuchi*, even though I am a native Japanese speaker. There are also not much study conducted on this issue, as it is very difficult to measure, but Miyata and Nishisawa's study in 2007 reveled that more than half of Japanese reactive tokens are inserted in the middle of the primary speaker's utterance, a placement extremely rare in English.
They also discussed that some *aizuchi* are only possible to use in utterance-final position, such as そうですね, なるほど, and やっぱり, and when it violates this rule, the response could sound inappropriate, out of place, and rather hasty and inconsiderate

This was also seen among my students. When I gave them feedback saying that they should try to use more utterance internal *aizuchi*, they sometimes incorporated these phrases that made it sound awkward and disrupted the speaker, which had the opposite effect compared to its real effect from helping to create rhythm if the *aizuchi* was used effectively.

Benefits from Study Abroad Programs

✓ More opportunities to receive input
✓ More opportunities to produce output

It is important to first **create awareness** of Japanese listening behaviors

12. As I have discussed, difficulties exist that affect students from acquiring Japanese listening behaviors. However, in a study abroad program like CLS, it could provide more opportunities for the students to practice this skill that is very limited in JFL settings. In a JSL setting, there are more opportunities for the students to receive input through interacting with NSs in their daily life, or by just simply being surrounded by NSs. They could also receive input through watching Japanese TV shows, as *aizuchi* is commonly seen in any talk shows. Students also have more opportunities to produce output, from again, interacting with NSs.

In order to take advantage of the environment, it is still necessary to provide them the information of basic characteristics of Japanese listening behaviors to create awareness among learners, since without awareness, they will not know what to pay attention to when interacting with NSs or what they need to be careful when practicing their skill.

Attempt in CLS

Using "Action!"
- Provide more opportunities for interaction

Using the Application Session
- Create awareness
- Provide in-class practice time
- Provide explicit feedback

13. Now, I would like to talk about the attempt that was conducted to help students to become 聞き上手 through the program.

    As I stated earlier, students could receive a lot more input on Japanese listening behavior in a study abroad program through interacting with native speakers, but "Action!" assignments helped to provide even more opportunities for social interaction.

    Also, I have stated that it is important to first create awareness among students about the cross cultural differences that exist in listening behaviors. After noticing the difficulties that students had in incorporating Japanese-like listening skills, we had a discussion during the application class about the cross cultural listening behavior differences, and tried to create awareness so it would help them to perform better during the application session and also in real life. Also, we provided opportunities for students to actually practice their listening skills during the application session and gave them feedback on their performance.

Intermediate-Level Class

8 students
2 to 3 *Action* to report each day

1 reporter
1 listener
1 time keeper
1 summarizer
↓
Feedback from instructor

14. Here is how the application session was set up for the intermediate level class where they had the opportunity to practice their engaged listening skill.

There were 8 students in the class, and each of them had to report 2 to 3 actions each session.

One student at a time reported their findings from action to another student, who had the listening role.

A time keeper was also assigned to one student, since students' reports tended to get long, and we thought it was important for the students at this level to acquire the skill of summarizing. Also, after each report, I had another student, neither the reporter nor the listener, summarize what the report was about so that they could also practice the skill of summarizing, and also to make sure that everyone was listening to the report. So in total, four students had a role in each reporting, and the remaining four quietly listened to the conversation that was taking place. The instructor observed the students quietly, and made comments and error correction after each report was done.

Explicit Feedback

> **Feedback to listener:**
- Ask a question, or make a comment at the end so you can expand the conversation
- Use more internal utterances
- Show more engagement through nodding, etc.

15. Various feedbacks were given to all three students, the reporter, listener, and the summarizer, in addition to explicit grammar and pronunciation correction. I will like to focus here on the types of feedback that was given to the listener.

The feedback to the listener consisted advises such as to ask a question, or make a comment at the end so that they can expand the conversation and to let the speaker know that you are interested in the report, and to use more aizuchi while listening. Another feedback that was also often given was to show more engagement through gestures, such as nodding and smiling. These feedbacks were given to the students after coming to a mutual agreement among the instructors that these advices could potentially help the students to become better at engaged listening.

Challenges

- Observation difficulties
- Not enough concrete rules known about the usage of *aizuchi*
- Need to figure out a way that all students can participate in *application*

16. Needless to say, study abroad program can help to increase students' engaged listening skills, but there are still challenges that need to be considered.

First, there is the difficulty in observing students' out of class practices. As I mentioned before, the beauty of the study abroad program to enhance the students' engaged listening skill is that they have so much opportunity to interact with NSs where they could receive great amount of input as well as opportunities to practice their skills, which is often limited in a JFL classroom setting. However, we cannot observe whether the students are practicing their listening skills while interacting with NSs. In the case of "Action!" assignments, students may be caught in taking notes while interviewing the NSs, or they may not be interviewing face to face. They might just be asking questions through email or facebook messages and such.

Also, as I stated before, there is simply not enough concrete rules known about the usage of aizuchi, therefore, is difficult to explicitly teach listening behaviors in the classroom setting. That is why the feedback that was given became more like an advice.

And in the case of the application session in CLS, we need to figure out a way that all students can participate. In last year's program, only four students were able to participate during each report, and it did seem a bit awkward when there were audience, which were the remaining four people, while two people were having a conversation. So for this year, it might be better to make more groups reporting at once, or to set up a situation where there is one speaker and multiple listeners.

What We Need To Do

● Create more specific Listening Strategy Training Plan

Examples:

• Multiple listeners
• Listening in various situation
→ (serious/laid back, show interest/disinterest, etc.)
● To collect data so that the effectiveness of the training could be measured
● To collect students' evaluation
● Need to discover more concrete rules on the usage of *aizuchi*

17. In the CLS program in 2013, the goal to become good listener for the intermediate level class was not set until their difficulties were actually observed in the application session. Therefore, I did not go into the program having a specific listening strategy training plan in mind. Therefore, for this year's program and now on, there is a need to create more specific plan, ideally a material that focuses on listening strategy training. For example, it is important for students to learn to be good listeners in various situations, such as when there is more than one listener, and when they want to convey different meanings to the speaker while they are listening. It is also necessary to see the effect from before and after the training by collecting empirical data, as well as collecting students' feedback on the training. If we find it effective, we could start researching whether the same or similar training could be implemented in the JFL setting as well. There is also a need to find out more concrete rules on the usage of *aizuchi* in the field of Japanese conversation analysis so that more explicit teaching becomes possible, and that it could be incorporated in the training plan.

Conclusion

- More emphasis on 聞き上手 training is necessary
- Focusing both on **interpretive** and **engagement** listening in classroom

18. I conclude my presentation by stating that more emphasis is needed on the training of engaged listening in Japanese classroom, since today, listening training is mostly only conducted for interpretive skills. Engaged listening skill is necessary if students want to be accepted and successfully assimilate into Japanese society. Therefore, it is important for us teachers to help cultivate these skills for our student's future success in Japan.

Thank you!

19. And that concludes my presentation. Thank you.

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