

# Communicative Language Teaching and Multiple-Choice Listening Tests

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This paper will discuss the current English Language teaching and testing situation in Japan from the viewpoint of oral communication abilities (listening and speaking), and attempt to point out the potential problems within a listening comprehension test so that classroom teachers will have a better assessment when conducting their own tests.

## **The Communicative Approach to Teaching English as a Foreign Language**

Communicative competence is the ability not only to apply grammatical rules of language in forming grammatically correct sentences, but also to recognize when, where and with whom to use these sentences appropriately. Since communication has become the center of language teaching, techniques designed to promote communicative competence—formally called “the Communicative Approach”—have become very popular among English teachers around the world. At the same time, the emergence of this communicative era has led many teachers to reconsider the role and significance of testing communication ability. Teachers are not really sure how to measure their stu-

students' communication ability, yet there has been an increasing demand for the assessment of students' English listening and speaking abilities. In order to understand clearly how to measure and score the test or what the test score actually means, components or constructs of these abilities themselves should be made clear first, and after these elements are identified, teachers would be better able to know what their tests are really expected to measure. With regard to the communication abilities, the present paper will mainly deal with teaching or testing of the listening ability ; which has been the focus of English communication teaching.

The theoretical approaches to the components and definition of listening ability draw heavily upon the work of J. C. Richards (1983). Various qualities of tests or testing itself will be provided with major reliance upon A. Hughes (1993, 2003), L. F. Bachman (1995), L. F. Bachman and A. S. Palmer (1996), M. Rost (1996), J. D. Brown (1996), L. R. Aiken (1998) and L. H. Janda (1998).

The current trend in Japan in studying English is generally moving toward learning the ability of oral communication. An entire industry of private vocational language schools and "culture centers" have developed in which oral communication is taught by the native speakers. Furthermore, many universities or colleges in Japan have begun to include an English listening ability test in their entrance examination, while English is also being taught even in many of the Japanese elementary schools.

### **The Communicative Approach in Japan**

High schools and junior high schools in Japan have been greatly in-

fluenced by the Mombu-kagakusho (the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) which has advocated the importance of English education and stresses the enhancement of students' oral communication ability through the communicative approach.

English education at universities has also been reconsidered because of the general movement toward a communicative approach in society and because of a concern with students' needs. As a whole, teaching English through the communicative approach seems to be the trend.

Thus, with the emphasis upon oral communication in Japan, the teachers of English who are especially interested in teaching listening ability have been very active in the use of relevant listening texts as well as in implementing various innovative in-class listening activities. These teachers, however, have had to face even greater difficulty than the teaching of listening itself: an effective means of measuring students' listening ability accurately and appropriately has become the greater problem.

### **The Role of Testing**

Tests can have several beneficial factors both for teachers and students. To the teachers, testing may include information as an aid to the improvement of their instruction, while, to the students, it may include an aid to their self-diagnosis and understanding. Tests may help the teachers answer the question of whether they have been effective in their teaching, whereas tests can identify specific content the students have learned.

Test techniques are a means of eliciting behavior from students which can be a reliable and valid indicator of their ability and also which can be reliably scored. Multiple-choice testing is one of them. Students must identify or select the correct or most appropriate options. Distractors or wrong answers are the wrong choices to the students who possess the complete knowledge asked for in the item, while they should be plausible and attractive to those who do not have the complete knowledge.

The carefully designed standardized tests such as the "Test of English as a Foreign Language" (TOEFL), "Michigan Test of English Language Proficiency" (MTELP), "Comprehensive English Language Test" (CELT) are easy to administer and score. They are objective, precise and reliable. Their format is usually multiple-choice questions.

Multiple choice tests are frequently used in listening comprehension tests and they seem to be familiar to millions of test takers as well as most test makers. Multiple-choice listening tests are popularly used simply because they are easy to score and simple to use, but their main virtues may be objectivity of scoring, efficiency and applicability.

However, multiple-choice testing in listening comprehension has some problems in spite of its wide acceptance. One is that students have to do two things at one time ; listen to a tape and read questions. Moreover, as soon as he/she responds to one item, he/she has to be prepared to what he/she hears next.

Multiple-choice testing in listening comprehension is used not only in imported listening tests such as TOEFL, or CELT but also in domestic tests such as the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP) test. Also, multiple-choice testing is used in teacher-made

tests as well. In the imported tests, the test questions on the answer sheet are given in English, while in the STEP test and some teacher made tests, some items on the answer sheets are given in Japanese. One interesting issue that we will specifically investigate is whether students perform differently depending on the language used on the answer sheet.

Although multiple-choice testing has experienced many attacks in the past (some justified and some not), many of the test specialists still promote the multiple-choice format as the best tool among those available. Multiple-choice testing, as Haladyna (1994) points out, has actually thrived especially in recent years, and it is used in many ways : placement, selection, awards, certification, licensure, course credit (proficiency), grade, diagnosis of what has and has not been learned, and even employment.

A multiple-choice format test, one of the most popular test techniques, should be closely investigated as it seems to be the most typical format used especially in the listening tests.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In the study of any language proficiency test, whether it be a listening test or not, it is essential to justify its validity, reliability and practicality.

The multiple-choice tests are popularly used simply because they are easy to score and simple to use. They can also be graded with objectivity and they are efficient. But, the fact that the multiple-choice tests can offer much flexibility for assessing a diversity of achievements is perhaps the principal advantage among their various

strengths.

Nevertheless, the virtues of the multiple-choice tests are sometimes overestimated ; their disadvantages or limitations should be recognized and examined.

The teachers of English in Japan have had to face the difficulty of how to measure their students' listening ability accurately and appropriately. As the tests are usually based on what the teachers have taught in their class, they often have to construct their tests and assess their students by themselves. These teachers, however, are not testing experts and are rarely sure of what they are really assessing.

The basic multiple-choice format in testing listening comprehension require students to choose or select the correct or most appropriate options. Granted that students are facing a tough job to do two things at the same time (looking through four or more alternatives and decide which one to choose while listening to the passage or conversation), the multiple-choice format is favored by many people. One reason is that multiple-choice tests are easy to score and that scoring can be rapid and economical. At the same time, it can be objective and reliable. Unlike speaking tests and writing tests where raters' subjective judgments are involved, multiple-choice tests do not require raters. Therefore, the test scores in multiple-choice tests should be more reliable. In addition, multiple choice tests can require the examinee to discriminate among alternatives that can require a level of mastery that a free-response item may not be able to detect (Hopkins et al, 1990).

The validity of well constructed multiple-choice formatted test items has been well established. The question of content validity be-

comes somewhat subjective, however, because individual judgment has determined the representativeness of the collective test items. That is, do they adequately cover the range of content intended by the instructor or course?

### **Language Testing in Japan**

Listening comprehension testing in Japan does not have a long history. This is because teachers have been hesitant to accept the testing in spite of its necessity. When the need first became evident, sound discrimination tests were devised. Later, tests based on listening to passages with multiple-choice questions were introduced. Still later, listening tests involving communication through dialogues were conducted. There are strategies to deal with dialogues in the four-option multiple-choice format. One typical pattern is that an audio dialogue is followed by a comprehension question posed by a different speaker. The dialogue is then related to a written multiple-choice question. Another pattern is that dialogues can be lengthy and the questions are printed in the test book.

There seems to be a particular disadvantage of using multiple-choice formatted listening tests. The problem is compounded since the student must quickly read four or more alternatives written in English and decide which one to choose while listening to the passage or conversation in English. In some situations, the student is required not only to find the answer from the written alternatives but also to listen to four or more English alternatives as well as the primary oral passages or dialogues. As soon as he/she responds to one item, he/she has to be prepared for what he/she hears next. Under time limita-

tions, some students may not be able to answer all items. Students may not be able to understand what is written on the answer sheet in English, even though they may be able to understand what they hear. Answer sheets written in Japanese may save time for those who cannot quickly find the answer due to failure to understand what is written in English. Students' listening ability should be assessed not through what they read but through what they listen to.

Where a multiple-choice format is used to test listening comprehension, there seems to be a potential for disparity in the manner in which the answers are presented, i.e., English or the students' native language. The question is whether listening skills alone are being addressed; a question of the extent to which reading comprehension is contaminating the listening comprehension test results. More research should be conducted to answer this specific question.

### **Multiple-Choice Listening Tests**

Since the Mombu-kagakusho put more emphasis on the necessity of enhancing students' oral communication ability, many upper secondary schools encouraged their students to improve by offering them appropriate measures based on listening and oral communication. This new emphasis on listening and speaking thus became the most important targets of English teaching in the lower and upper secondary schools in Japan.

Subsequently, most college students want to improve their English communication ability—speaking and listening skills. However, as indicated previously, the assessment of students' progress in oral communication has mainly been left to classroom teachers who seldom

have more than cursory training in 'teacher prepared tests.' In addition, there is a dearth of research pertaining to the question: "Do multiple-choice formatted listening tests assess only listening?" It seems that current testing modality, whether professionally prepared or classroom 'teacher-made,' contaminates the evaluation purpose.

It is generally recognized that the objective tests have reliability. The tests used in the listening tests are often objective, as Bachman (1995, 76) says, "The multiple-choice technique is the most obvious example of an objective test, although other tests can be scored objectively as well."

However, Hughes (1993, 40) states, "While it would be mistaken to say that multiple choice items are never appropriate, it is certainly true that there are many circumstances in which they are quite inappropriate."

More objective research is needed to determine whether evaluation of English language listening comprehension is compromised by the use of written English materials during evaluation.

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