

- MENU
- PRINTABLE VERSION
- HELP & FAQs

Learners' Affect and Learning of Listening Skills: Strategies to Deal With Negative Affect

Etsuko Shimo

Aichi Shukutoku University, Chubu University

This paper explores the kinds of negative affect interfering with listening comprehension that Japanese learners of English are likely to have in conversation with English speakers, and the kinds of strategies they use to deal with the negative affect. The data examined includes the transcription of three interviews each with five study participants, their written records about their listening activities, and their written feedback on the study. The paper indicates that Japanese learners tend

to feel tension, anxiety, and even fear because of their lack of confidence in their English language competence, unfamiliarity with the situation or the context of the listening activities, and mistaken beliefs about listening. They show several strategies to deal with such negative affect. Among them are: being aware of clues other than the words that they actually catch, learning communication strategies, and modifying debilitating beliefs.

この論文では日本人英語学習者が英語で話す者との会話の中で聴解力に悪影響を及ぼす恐れのある否定的な情意とそれを処理するのに用いるストラテジーの種類を探究した。考察したデータは5人の研究参加者それぞれとの3回のインタビューのトランスクリプト、及び彼らのリスニング活動について書かれた記録とその研究に対する文書によるフィードバックである。この論文は日本人学習者は英語力への自信の欠如、リスニング活動の状況や場面に慣れていないこと、そしてリスニングについての誤ったビリーフのために、緊張感や不安を感じたり、時には恐れを感じたりする傾向にあることを示唆している。彼らはそれらの否定的な情意に対処するためにストラテジーを使っている。実際に聞き取る言葉以外の手がかりに気付くこと、コミュニケーションストラテジーを学ぶこと、マイナスの効果を与えるビリーフを修正することが、そういったストラテジーの例である。

Introduction

This paper attempts to describe Japanese learners' negative affect shown in listening to spoken English and strategies to cope with it. Affect encompasses "aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour" (Arnold & Brown, 1999, p. 1), and this paper focuses especially on Japanese

learners' negative affect that might interfere with their listening comprehension.

Listening comprehension is one of the weakest skills for Japanese learners of English and one in which they have least confidence, one reason being they have not received enough training at junior and senior high school (cf. Shimo, 2001; Shimo, 2002). Exploring the learners' feelings and emotions in the involvement of listening activities may help teachers understand these negative factors and therefore facilitate their learning by eliminating or by at least diminishing these. The strategies that the learners showed in this study provide helpful implications for teaching, as well. The specific research questions are:

1. What kinds of negative affect that might interfere with their listening comprehension are Japanese learners of English likely to possess when listening to other speakers, mainly native speakers (NSs) of English, in English conversation?
2. How do they deal with these aspects of negative affect?

According to previous research, language learners employ various affect-related strategies, i.e., actions that learners take to control their affect better (cf. Cohen, 1998; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990). Oxford (1990, p.320), for example, lists ways of controlling one's affect as "affective strategies", such as "making positive statements" and "discussing one's feelings with someone else."

Categorization of strategies does not necessarily coincide among different researchers. The fact that one strategy could be related to more than one feature out of cognition, metacognition,

affect, and sociality, keeps the categorization from being clear-cut. However, categorizing strategies in terms of these features is not the focus of this paper. Rather, this paper will discuss strategies that the participants actually used to cope with their negative affect, whether or not they were related to other functions such as cognition or metacognition, and it will help to reveal ways to promote positive affect on the part of the learners.

Participants and Study Methodology

The discussion in this paper is based on the study project of Shimo (2001) on listening strategies that Japanese learners of English employ. The original study was a qualitative study of five Japanese learners, who were studying in different programs at an American university: Ayako, twenty-seven years old, English Language Institute (ELI) student; Misae, twenty-one, ELI student; Sayaka, eighteen, undergraduate; Koichi, thirty-two, graduate; and Toru, thirty, ELI student and graduate auditor. They were English-as-a-second-language (ESL) learners when the study was conducted; however, all had at least six years of English as a foreign language (EFL) in Japanese secondary schools.

In the original study (Shimo, 2001; also see Shimo, 2002), the study participants:

- a) kept written records about their listening activities,
- b) were interviewed for up to one and half hours three times over a period of approximately two months,
- c) shared their strategies by using a compiled list of their strategies, and
- d) reflected on the above procedures and provided feedback to the study in writing.

Transcription of the three interviews with each participant along with his/her written records and comments was reviewed with the focus on the above research questions, and the learners' own descriptions about how they were engaged in listening activities provide the findings discussed in this paper. The participants' words have been translated from the original language (i.e. Japanese) to English by the researcher with careful attention so that the original meaning is conveyed accurately.

Findings

Negative feelings and beliefs were observed among the study participants that seemed to interfere with their listening comprehension. Such negative affect seemed to attribute to the learners' lack of confidence in their English language competence and their unfamiliarity with the situation or the context of the listening activities. Also, certain beliefs seem to have caused them negative attitudes. Strategies reported by the study participants (a–i) shall be illustrated here with description of the affect they showed in the listening activity:

- a) To make use of clues other than the words that the learner actually catches.

Attending to the other person's facial expressions and tone of the voice, making predictions, as well as making inferences from contextual clues could give learners the idea that they have something to rely on to enhance their listening comprehension. Ayako, who had had teaching experience at a junior high school in Japan, commented:

...by using [the supportive actions], well, if you don't have to use them, that's the best, probably,

but well, anyway, when one understands something [by using the actions], one will have the feeling of accomplishment. It is true of my students and me. Then, the feeling of achievement will lead to confidence, and one will be able to listen calmly. It is not about me, but I can tell it from the experience with my students.

Her words imply that when learners have no clues other than the actual words that they hear, they are likely to feel more anxiety. When they are aware of other clues helpful for their comprehension, they may feel more comfortable and prepared for listening.

- b) To bring up a topic that you are interested in or you are familiar with.

Toru and Sayaka pointed out that they could comprehend spoken words better when the content was intriguing or familiar to them. Therefore, it was a good strategy in conversing with others to start with a topic of such content in order to promote calmness and confidence. Toru said:

I myself bring up a topic. I bring up one. I take others into my world. Then, I can comprehend [the conversation] better.

Many teachers are already aware that learners are likely to engage actively in learning activities that they themselves find intriguing. When learners listen to what they want to know or what they know a lot about, they feel less anxiety and tension.

- c) To use laughter and create a comfortable atmosphere.

Toru's following comment relates to the previous strategy (b), and also conveys another strategy "to use laughter," (cf. "using laughter," Oxford, 1990, p. 320). Toru shared his experience of speaking with an engaged couple.

...I started to talk about Japanese culture, a cliché. But well, I know I can't start talking about sushi all of a sudden, so...I changed the topic slightly, like how we give wedding ceremonies in Japan... Then, they can enjoy the talk more...Well, I feel I can comprehend better when I feel happy and comfortable with the others, so I think it's good to make the others laugh in the beginning by saying that we spend millions [of yen] on a wedding ceremony.

Laughter usually creates a relaxing atmosphere. Learners will be less tense and better ready for the subsequent utterance.

d) To learn how to react when one cannot understand.

Toru mentioned that he can be at ease in listening because he has practiced expressions asking for repetition of what was said. Similarly, Koichi shared his feelings that he had in conversation with his friend, a native speaker of English:

In the beginning, I felt quite nervous even about seeing him first of all...I worried a lot about whether we could communicate at all. So I always brought Japanese-English and English-Japanese [dictionaries], but I gradually found them unnecessary, and well, if I didn't understand, I only had to ask for clarification, I've learned to manage that.

Ayako also said that telling the other person that she did not understand was a good strategy for her:

When I say I don't understand, the other person will know that I don't understand, and he may say [what he had said] again...I can stop the flow of conversation. For a moment. So, while the other person is thinking how to explain, I can take a deep breath and then get back to the listening well.

Familiarity with the communication strategy of asking for clarification gives the listener a great sense of security.

e) To think that English is not a foreign or second language.

Sayaka mentioned that listening to English in the same manner as she listens to Japanese helps her be relaxed. Koichi also pointed out that that is the ultimate way to enhance listening comprehension skills. Some learners may feel tense and anxious as they intentionally try to concentrate on the utterance or as they purposefully try to use certain strategies. It should be noted that both Sayaka and Koichi were advanced-level learners. This strategy is perhaps more suitable for such learners, who no longer need so much explicit guidance in listening comprehension.

f) To speak with the same person many times.

Four participants (Ayako, Koichi, Misae, & Toru) mentioned that they feel tense, anxious or even fearful when encountering a native speaker of English for the first few times and therefore their listening comprehension often declines. They attributed

such negative feelings to the speaker's "exotic" appearance if he/she is not a "familiar-looking" Asian, unpredictability of topics that the speaker provides, lack of confidence in their ability to communicate in English, and pressure to survive these circumstances. For example, the following words of Toru illustrate his lack of confidence contributing to anxiety:

...the complex that my English is poor, improper...I feel fear that they might laugh at me secretly, thinking that someone who's received higher education speaks such [low] level English. I might be exaggerating, but like "can he only say such silly ideas?," "He speaks such poor English." When I think of these, I feel tense. I can't relax.

The participants reported that they feel less tension and anxiety as they speak with the same person many times. Thus, this is a good way to build positive affect.

- g) To speak with all kinds of people many times.

While appreciating the effect of the strategy of speaking with the same person repeatedly (f), Ayako made an intriguing comment on it:

I appreciate the fact that I feel comfortable in the conversation. Well, I can comprehend a lot and speak relaxed. But just [learning] one thing, I've felt recently that there's a problem. And well, I'm now in the US and so it's nice to talk with a lot of people. You can do it [speak with the same person] in Japan...

Koichi also mentioned that one has to get used to the act of speaking with native speakers and one can do so only by having more chances to do so. This strategy may appear to contradict the previous one (f), but both can be employed at the same time for different purposes.

- h) To realize that it is not necessary to catch all the words in order to comprehend the meaning.

Ur (1984) points out that language learners are likely to feel a kind of compulsion to understand everything in listening. Learners tend to be "disturbed, discouraged and even completely thrown off balance if they come across an incomprehensible word" (p.14). Likewise, Misae originally believed that she should catch all the words in listening, but eventually learned that she could get the main idea without listening to everything. She reported that after changing her attitude, she was able to listen more calmly.

- i) To realize that even native speakers are not perfect listeners; to realize that they sometimes use the same listening strategies that learners use.

The following comment of Misae on "to learn how to react when you cannot understand" interestingly entails another strategy:

To know that native speakers use the same way [Misae read the sentence on the strategy list aloud]. Yes, that's right! Even native speakers don't have perfect listening skills. If we think that they are the same as us, well, yeah, we would feel more relaxed.

Native speakers do not always listen to all the words. They often depend on other means for better comprehension and for better communication, such as the speaker's facial expressions and tones of speech. They also sometimes ask for clarification. Misae's words imply that realizing this simple fact can contribute to the learner's calmness.

Implications and Conclusion

The study participants presented strategies to cope with their tension, anxiety, and even fear that they feel when conversing in English. Teachers should help learners familiarize themselves with these strategies and help them construct positive affect in listening to spoken English. Being simply positive will not necessarily result in better listening comprehension immediately, but it will surely help learners actively engage in learning the skills of listening.

This paper shows that some mistaken or negative beliefs cause learners anxiety and vice-versa. The erroneous belief that one has to catch all the spoken words to comprehend the meaning could lead to anxiety in listening, for instance. It would be helpful for teachers to survey the learners' beliefs about listening comprehension skills through questionnaires, interviews, spoken and written dialogues with them, as well as observation of their involvement in listening activities.

Learners should also be reminded that listening in conversation with others involves a number of active phases. If learners know what to do when at a loss in the flow of the other person's utterances, or what to do with the words they do not understand, they do not have to be overwhelmed by anxiety and tension. They can feel more secure. When they are calm and comprehend the spoken words better, they gain

confidence. Their confidence will again help them be calmer. Learners' active involvement in listening by making use of all the contextual and visual clues and different communication strategies will enable them to stay in this good circle.

The findings discussed here, though inferred from ESL learners, can be applied in the EFL context as well. The anxiety and tension that the study participants showed as ESL learners is also observed among EFL learners in Japan, although EFL learners usually have much less opportunity to speak with NSs of English. EFL learners in Japan are also sometimes faced with unfamiliar situations and contexts. It is needless to say that those cases are not always with NSs. Unfortunately, the problem of lack of confidence is also widespread. EFL learners are likely to be intimidated by the act of conversing in English and might even simply stop making efforts to listen to the other speaker.

While being much less exposed to English conversations with NSs, EFL learners can speak with non-native speakers (NNSs) of English. If they converse with classmates whose English levels are homogenous, they will not feel as much pressure as they would do in conversing with NSs (Murphy, 1998). They can get used to the English conversation activity itself and may be better prepared for new and unfamiliar situations and contexts. Moreover, it is equally important for both EFL learners and ESL learners to realize that strategies which learners have already acquired in their L1 listening can be transferred to FL/L2 listening and that they do not have to be "perfect listeners" to be "good listeners." It should also allow them to feel more confident about themselves or to feel more relaxed about FL/L2 listening.

This paper has provided only a few of many strategies that learners can employ to deal with their negative affect in listening to spoken English. Also, negative affect may attribute to other factors than those discussed here. Each learner's reactions to his/her negative affect, and acquisition and use of strategies,

may be conditional on personality, learning style, and English level. These issues remain for further investigation. Nonetheless, the paper has shed light on a few possible ways to keep Japanese learners from shutting their ears to spoken English in anxiety and tension.

References

- Arnold, J. & Brown, H. D. (1999). A map of the terrain. In J. Arnold (Ed.), *Affect in language learning* (pp. 1-27). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cohen, A. D. (1998). *Strategies in learning and using a second language*. New York: Longman.
- Murphey, T. (1998). *Language hungry! An introduction to language learning fun and self-esteem*. Tokyo: Macmillan Language House.
- O'Malley, J. M. & Chamot, A.U. (1990). *Learning strategies in second language acquisition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Oxford, R. L. (1990). *Language learning strategies: What every teacher should know*. New York: Newberry House.
- Shimo, E. (2001). Japanese learners of English: Their beliefs about listening skills and their use of listening strategies. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Graduate School of Education, State University of New York, University at Buffalo.
- Shimo, E. (2002). Learning listening comprehension skills in English: The analysis of Japanese learners' beliefs and its implications. *The Language Teacher*, 26, (10), pp.15-18.
- Ur, P. (1984). *Teaching listening comprehension*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.