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TLT Interviews brings you direct insights from leaders in the field of language learning, teaching, and education—and you are invited to be an interviewer! If you have a pertinent issue you would like to explore and have access to an expert or specialist, please make a submission of 2,000 words or less.

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Welcome to the first edition of *TLT Interviews* for 2018! To start the New Year, we are excited to bring you two interviews covering two of the major language skills—listening and reading. Our first interview is with Alastair Graham-Marr, who will discuss the role of the English phonological system in relation to listening abilities. The second interview is with Dr. Richard Day, who will share his thoughts about the current state of the world of extensive reading.

Alastair Graham-Marr, a 28-year language-teaching veteran, is currently an associate professor at Tokyo University of Science and a director of ABAX Publishing. His research interests include the effect of language output on overall language accuracy and the effect of explicit instruction on listening proficiency.



He has received a research grant to investigate “The effect of explicit instruction on the listening comprehension of learners from a mora-timed L1 background.” In addition, he has authored and edited many textbooks including *Communication Spotlight*, *Academic Listening & Speaking*, and *Top-Up Listening*. He has presented at conferences in many countries around the world, including Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Thailand, the United Arab Emirates, Germany, Bosnia, Slovakia, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Brazil, and New Zealand. He was a Featured Speaker at the JALT2016 Conference. He was interviewed for *TLT* by Jeff Wastila, who also works at Tokyo University of Science. Jeff has been teaching in Japan for seven years and holds an MA in Education. His research interests focus on task-based learning, specifically the impact of team-based, team-assessed task-based learning and teaching in university classrooms in Japan. So without further ado, to the first interview!

An Interview with Alastair Graham-Marr

Jeff Wastila: I've been reading a lot of your recent research on listening where you assert that listening needs to be given more emphasis in English classrooms in Japan. Moreover, you emphasize that listening is a crucial factor in second language development. I'd like to discuss this with you today.

Alastair Graham-Marr: Of course. I'd be happy to.

Firstly, it seems that EFL learners in Europe find more success learning and speaking English than Japanese English learners. Can you explain why?

Well, more research is needed in this area. To date, there have been relatively few comparative studies done to elucidate any differences between how learners coming from different phonological backgrounds learn a language. However, let's look at where we actually learn a language. Do you learn a language in a classroom? Or, do you learn a language outside a classroom? Usually the differences between a successful language learner and an unsuccessful language learner is not their experience in the class, rather it's their experience outside the classroom. A successful learner will be successful because they regularly try to use English outside of class, for example, listening to music with English lyrics, watching YouTube, movies, television, or what have you. Students who access the language outside of the classroom are usually going to have success.

If you ask the average Swede, Dane, or Norwegian where they learned their English, they'll often say it was from watching British television or listening to English-language music, and so on. Obviously, with the rise of the Internet, Japanese learners have the very same opportunities, but they struggle to comprehend the language. A very common thing I find in my classrooms is I'll play a recording for the students and ask them how it was. They'll say it was difficult. So, we'll look at the scripts at the back of

the book. Then I'll ask them how many words they don't know. The students are usually surprised to discover that they know all the words. Therefore, the problem is Japanese students are not hearing words they know. And, if you can't hear words you know, then you can't understand YouTube clips, movies or television. Thus, vital language learning opportunities are lost.

Why can't Japanese English learners hear the words they already know?

First of all, most Japanese English learners aren't taught the phonological features of English—and they need to be taught these features. They are taught the pronunciation of single words. They are taught word accents. But they are not taught any of the suprasegmental phonological features, the clause level features like weak vowels, such as in “liaison” and “elision” and so on. In my opinion, this is more important.

Japanese is actually an easy language to listen to. Although it takes years to learn how to read Japanese, it's quite easy to listen to. It has five vowels, and these vowels are usually pronounced very clearly. As a second language speaker of Japanese, if I don't understand something, it's usually a vocabulary problem. If I know the word, I usually hear it, not 100% of the time, but usually. I think most native English speakers who speak Japanese would agree with me.

Can you talk about the relationship between Japanese English learners and their struggle with listening to English, a stress-timed language?

All languages, to a certain degree, tend towards having even rhythms. This is called isochrony. Do you speak in even rhythms by syllable? Or, do you speak in even rhythms by stressed elements? Syllable-timed languages are stressed evenly by syllable. An example would be Korean where the time interval between each syllable is more or less equal. For example, *anyong-haseyo* (good afternoon) has more or less even timing by syllable: *an-yong-ha-se-yo*. Most Asian languages tend to be syllable-timed: Turkish, Nepalese, Chinese, and so on. Although I should mention that Chinese is often referred to as a quasi-syllable timed language. That is, Chinese is by and large stress-timed, but with some exceptions.

Japanese, being mora-timed, is even one step further away from English. A mora can be defined simply as a sound unit. Mora-timed languages also have an even rhythm; however, in mora-timed languages, the time interval between each mora is

roughly equal. For example, Japanese has long vowels and short vowels. However, differences in vowel length result in different words being rendered, such as, *kyouka* (強化: strengthen) and *kyoka*. (許可: permission). Both words have two syllables: *kyou-ka* / *kyo-ka*, however the first word, *kyouka*, has a long vowel and therefore has 3 moras, while the second word, *kyoka*, has a short vowel and therefore only 2 moras. The time needed to enunciate the word *kyouka* is roughly one third longer than the time needed to enunciate the second word *kyoka*, as each mora is usually given more or less equal weight.

English, however, is stress-timed. The sentence I always use to demonstrate this is: “Go down the road to the end of the canal.” If you look at the syllable differences, we have: GO DOWN—one; the ROAD—two; to the END—three; of the CANAL—four. So, every segment has a different syllable difference. One. Two. Three. Four. GO DOWN the ROAD to the END of the caNAL.

GO DOWN the ROAD to the END of the caNAL

1	2	3	4	

(Graham-Marr, 2016)

The time interval between each beat is more or less the same. Another example might be “car” and “car park.” When you say “car” by itself, as a single syllable, it is drawn out to hold its single time interval. But, if you put it together with “park,” you have “car park.” And “car” is enunciated quickly, as the two words “car park” hold just one time interval. The reason it gets reduced down is to accommodate the even rhythm of isochrony, which is more or less even by the stressed elements of the sentence. That's basically the big difference between the languages in terms of listening. Many European languages, like Swedish, Danish, and Norwegian, are stress-timed languages. Is it a coincidence that Scandinavians tend to be good English learners, or is it related to phonology? I believe it is not a coincidence, however, obviously more research is needed.

My anecdotal evidence, talking with language learners and teachers from Europe, is that by and large, learners coming from stress-timed language backgrounds tend to hear most of the words they know. Whereas, Japanese English learners struggle to hear the words that they know.

So, if Japanese learners are taught these features, will they be better able to comprehend naturally spoken English?

Well, in my experience, the answer is yes, but it takes a long time. I've been doing questionnaires with my students about this topic for years. Most report improvements in listening comprehension, but a few lament that even though they understand the features, it is still difficult to comprehend everything. There is no easy road to improved listening comprehension. It takes a lot of time. I tell my students that all these books you see in bookstores advertising English mastery in 30 hours with some new special method are all just fantasy. There is NO speed learning. It takes hundreds of hours of practice. However, with guidance and practice, students can improve.

Guidance is necessary?

Again, that's a question I've looked into, and my students overwhelmingly state that guidance helps. This suggests that more of these suprasegmental features should be taught explicitly.

Are English teachers in Japan addressing these differences in listening? Are they making their students aware of the concept of English as a stress-timed language? Are they increasing the students' awareness of top-down listening, for example?

Well, in my experience, some are and some aren't. People who have an interest in phonology do address these differences. Teachers without much training, or without a background in linguistics and phonology, often don't. Such teachers are simply not aware of these differences.

Where do you go from here? How do we move on from this point here teaching Japanese English learners in Japan?

Well, the answer to this question hasn't changed in all my 28 years in Japan. You need to have qualified people—people who know what they're doing—just as you need to have a qualified dentist working on your teeth. Yet this simple fact doesn't seem to be understood.

For example, recently, there has been a movement towards improving the English abilities of Japanese learners by implementing EMI (English as a Medium of Instruction). Such programs have already been introduced in many universities around Japan. As a result, such schools often look at hiring content teachers who don't know anything about language teaching or phonology, nor have they given one thought about the phonological differences involved in the language learning process. So, students are left to sink or swim in these EMI environments, and given the extremely limited

classroom time that students have, this strikes me as an inefficient way to spend their time. If you look at these EMI programs, the vast majority of the students in these programs end up unable to reach the stated goals of these programs. Even at the elite level of Japanese education, is this move to EMI going to help? I would say in most cases, no. I believe you need a CLIL (Content and Language Integrated Learning) or an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) approach. That is, you need an English teacher in your English classes who is trained on the phonological differences. We need trained teachers who understand the needs of our students and can play an active role in helping the students develop their English listening skills. Developed listening skills will enable and empower students to go out and then learn on their own.

Thank you for your time and sharing your insights!

References

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For the second interview, we bring you an in-depth discussion with Richard Day, a professor in the Department of Second Language Studies at the University of Hawai'i. Dr. Day is a co-editor of *Reading in a Foreign Language* and is co-founder of the Extensive Reading Foundation. Although he has written numerous articles and book chapters, his most influential publications are on extensive reading (ER). After Dr. Day's talk at the 4th World Congress on Extended Reading (ERWC) in Tokyo last summer, he had a conversation about ER with Cory Koby, an assistant professor of English studies at Miyagi Gakuin Women's University. Cory researches ER and is currently focused on building a high-volume ER program and

