Decentering and Mediation: Reconciling Theory and Practice in Skills-Based Listening Instruction

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Language teaching theory has moved beyond only teaching the surface-level lexical and grammatical aspects of language to fostering the attitudes, skills, and knowledge to engage with language in new and unfamiliar contexts. Simultaneously, pressures on institutions to produce quantifiable results through such means as standardized tests have seen pedagogical frameworks like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages reduced to simple rubrics for assessing proficiency levels, potentially leading to reductive teaching. The present study illustrates how pedagogical theory might be reconciled with institutional demands. Specifically, I examined the author's planning and implementation of a compulsory first-year listening course and and presents a qualitative analysis of learning based on weekly post-lesson reflections. The findings suggest that theory and institutional demands can indeed be reconciled. Implications for practice and avenues for future research are also presented.

言語教育の理論は、単に語彙や文法のような言語の表面的な側面を教えるだけでなく、新しい、あるいはなじみのない文脈で使用される言語に取り組むための態度、技能、知識を育成する方向へと進んできた。同時に教育機関には標準化テストなどによって定量的な結果を出すべきという圧力があり、ヨーロッパ言語共通参照枠（CEFR）のような教育的枠組みは、習熟度を評価するための単純なルーブリックに縮小され、還元主義的な教育に向かわせている可能性がある。本研究では、教授法に関する理論と教育機関の要請をどのように調和させることができるかを検討した。大学一年次リスニング必修科目における筆者の授業計画と実施を検討し、毎週の授業後の振り返りに基づく学生の学習の質的分析を行った。研究結果は、理論と教育機関の要請が実際に調和しうることを示唆している。また、実践への示唆と今後の研究への道筋も示している。

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In the 21st century, language teaching theory has moved beyond viewing languages as "stable, pure objects existing outside their speakers/users" and learning as "an internal cognitive process, meant to prepare for later real-life use" (Piccardo et al., 2019, p. 19). Although the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) and research related to its theoretical constructs, including plurilingualism (Marshall & Moore, 2018) and mediation (Council of Europe, 2020), have spearheaded much pedagogical innovation (e.g., Brinkman et al., 2022; Daryai-Hansen et al., 2023) accountability pressures to produce quantifiable results have often seen such frameworks reduced to simplified rubrics for assessing proficiency levels and increased use of external examinations—in other words, a continued adherence to a view of languages as "stable, pure objects" and language learning as a mostly "internal cognitive process" involving their rote memorization (Piccardo et al., 2019, p. 19).

In Japan as well, universities are increasingly turning to private tests for course evaluation and awarding of credits (In'nami & Koizumi, 2017). As such, teachers may find themselves pressed into potentially reductive teaching or teaching to tests, treating learning as simply achieving a certain degree of lexical and grammatical mastery. Against this background, the present study seeks to consider how sociocultural and plurilingual theory, which consider the situated nature of language as central to teaching, might be reconciled with institutional pressures.

Language as Situated*:* Context-bound and Culturally Informed

Research has traditionally viewed language as homogenous, static knowledge divorced from use (May, 2014), treating it as a discrete set of lexical and grammatical knowledge that can be learned and applied later in "real life." However, language use is context-bound and more complex than the mere application of lexico-grammatical rules. Consider the following:

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1  A: where's Bill?
2  J: there's a yellow VW outside
   Sue's house
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(Levinson, 1983, p. 102)

From a purely linguistic viewpoint, this interaction is nonsensical. A proficient English user, however, can infer that Bill drives a yellow VW and, therefore, is at Sue's house. Although very short, this excerpt serves to display language use as bound by context.

Language use is also culturally informed—even across native-speaking English communities specifically, pragmatics and usage vary considerably.[1] As such, language teachers have a mandate to prepare learners to navigate context-bound and culturally informed interactions, even in preparation for standardized examinations. Take, for instance, past items on the Institutional Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL ITP) test revolving around campus parking. In Japan, where student carparks are uncommon in metropolitan areas, this unfamiliar context could present a non-linguistic barrier to understanding. Despite the efforts of test-makers to eliminate such barriers, language is inherently situated. In our globalized world, language teachers must not only teach the lexical and grammatical aspects of language but also prepare learners to navigate unfamiliar contexts, even while under pressure to boost test scores.

Sociocultural/plurilingual turns (see Firth & Wagner, 1997; May, 2014) in language education have borne witness to greater emphasis on the situated nature of language, and much recent literature considers how we might prepare learners to "mobilise *all* their competences, including their general (i.e., personal, non-linguistic) competences … in the fulfilment of a task, with a commensurate improvement of those competences … as a result" (Piccardo et al., 2019, p. 18). Skills-based tasks, however, often require neither critical engagement nor application of learners' full competences. A cursory examination of language textbooks or guides to standardized tests such as the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) and TOEFL will reveal that listening tasks, for instance, often require learners to answer multiple-choice questions that involve only rewordings of passages, rather than critical engagement with them. While such tests may provide useful heuristics for quantitatively evaluating linguistic ability, they are not necessarily sufficient in pedagogical practice itself; actual learning and use is more complex.

However, reconciling pedagogical theory with results-driven pressures such as to boost test scores is not easy for practitioners. The aim of this paper is to consider how such reconciliation might be feasible, through examination of the author's implementation of a compulsory listening-skills course. The next section explores the principles behind the course design, which, while informed by theoretical elements introduced here, was not an experimental design. Inspired by recollections of students' reflections during the course and how they might align with sociocultural and plurilingual theory, analysis of student learning was conducted after the end of the course.

Course Design

The 15-week course (one 90-minute lesson per week) was one I taught during the 2020 academic year at a small women's college in western Japan, where emphasis was placed on raising TOEIC scores, although teachers were free to create their own course content. Within this context, my charge was to design a year-long course simply titled "Listening," which was compulsory for first-year students. Conscious of sociocultural/plurilingual research, I sought to develop a course that would encourage students to "mobilize all their competences" (Piccardo et al., 2019, p. 18).

Participants

The participants (N=20) were students enrolled in the Department of English Language and Literature. Their English ability was relatively low; none had scored above 300 on the TOEIC® Listening & Reading test at the course's outset. Content was developed with these participants in mind.

Guiding Principles in Course and Material Design

Listening passages were crafted with the intent of having students critically engage, applying both linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge. Passages were set within specific contexts, domestic and foreign, with narrators from various backgrounds (see Appendix for an example). The first passages had the learners engage with unfamiliar language (i.e., new English expressions) through familiar contexts (e.g., experiences of Japanese youth). Familiar contexts were chosen in order to lower the cognitive burden of critically engaging with foreign language content. As the students became accustomed to this type of engagement, the burden was gradually increased with the introduction of slightly less familiar contexts (e.g., Japanese family life from a parental perspective) and then similar contexts in foreign environments (e.g., experiences of students at overseas universities, overseas family life, etc.).

Comprehension questions were designed in accordance with the following two principles:

1. Avoid answers explicitly stated in the recording.
2. Require students to give reasons (in English or Japanese) for answers derived from contextual clues, linguistic or otherwise, for which partial credit can be earned for reasoning based on contextual evidence.

Passages were designed to include clues that would lead to "correct" answers (i.e., the keyed responses). For instance, in one passage, a question was "Does

the narrator live in England, Japan, or the U.S.?" to which reference to a sofa costing $2,000 was a clue. Although this is not always the case in tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL, some questions (e.g., those from the latter occasionally requiring examinees to identify inferences) are based on contextual clues. Thus, the aim here was to foster the habit of paying attention to not only apparently key details but also seemingly peripheral information in order to develop a general image of the context of the passages. Students were allowed to use any means available to arrive at answers. For instance, in investigating geographical clues such as travelling distances, they were encouraged to use smartphones or any other devices to fill in knowledge gaps.

The structure of each lesson was essentially identical (see Table 1).

First, brief verbal feedback on the prior lesson's reflection sheets would be given, before students engaged in a warm-up activity: a game similar to *Taboo* in which they had to give clues and have their partners guess specific vocabulary from a given list including words that would appear in the main listening passages. Following the warm-up, I would read the main passage aloud, and students would take notes before discussing the content in pairs/groups and imagining what kind of questions might arise. The group work, including conjecture about possible questions, was intended to encourage proactive engagement with the passages, and development of an investigative stance toward various aspects of the passages. This stance would later help them verbalize reasons for their answers (i.e., by identifying cultural elements and imagining questions they might be asked, such as "Where is this passage set?"). Only after a second reading would I reveal the questions (six for each passage), writing them on the whiteboard. After a final reading aloud of the passage, I selected students to come forward and give their answers, afterward eliciting their reasoning verbally (all students submitted written explanations for their own answers at the end of each lesson). While presenting their justifications, classmates might provide other evidence from the passages suggesting different possible answers. As the discussions often required detailed reasoning, they were generally conducted in Japanese, for the focus was on engagement with and reasoning about the passage and, given the relatively low level of English proficiency, I did not wish to overburden the students. Finally, students would retell the listening passage to their partners before completing their short reflection sheets individually.

Starting at around 400 words in length at the beginning of the semester, passages were slowly increased to around 800 words by the 15th week. Initially, I read the passages aloud as many as four or five times, but from around mid-semester, as the students accustomed themselves, I rarely needed to read more than three times.

The Study: Process and Methodology

Analysis of students' learning was based on their post-class reflection sheets submitted after each lesson. Reflections were written in Japanese and analyzed in the original language (excerpts included below are post-analysis translations by the author). Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) was adopted as a methodology. Initially informed by my own sociocultural and plurilingual stance towards teaching language as situated, the first stages of analyses were conducted inductively (stages 1 and 2, below). Upon review of themes specifically related to learning, the process became increasingly informed by theoretical concepts I engaged with in further study, and subsequently more deductive (stages 3 and 4). The general process, adapted from Braun and Clarke, was as follows:

1. Data familiarization: First, during the course, I familiarized myself with the data as I transcribed the hand-written reflections. I refamiliarized myself with the data upon beginning the analysis roughly a year after the course ended.

Table 1

Lesson Structure

Task (time in minutes)	Description
Warm-up/Feedback (15)	Feedback on prior lessons' reflections, tasks to prime for main listening.
Main listening task (30)	Listening to and taking notes on a passage read multiple times, discussing content in pairs/small groups.
Comprehension questions (20)	Comprehension questions, also discussed in pairs/small groups.
Retelling (20)	Students retelling passage in own words to partners.
Reflection (5)	Students completing unguided reflection sheets.

2. Systematic data coding: Initial in-vivo and later descriptive coding generated 607 codes, including aspects such as enjoyment," "difficulty," and "group work." Co-occurrence networks were generated using KHCoder Version 3.Beta.04 (Higuchi, 2016) to assist in coding, which was carried out using MAXQDA2020 Version 20.4.2 (VERBI Software, 2020).
3. Generating initial themes, developing and reviewing themes: Codes were grouped into preliminary themes such as "questioning preconceptions," and "impressions," which were reviewed upon study of the literature (e.g., Candelier et al., 2012; Council of Europe, 2020). As the focus was on learning, irrelevant codes such as "today's class was fun," which did not provide reasons, were deleted, leaving a total of 327 codes.
4. Refining, defining, and naming themes: This stage resulted in the three themes explored below: *mediation*, *decentering*, and *engagement*.

Findings and Discussion

As analyses were informed by ongoing study, in this section I will briefly introduce the relevant literature before discussing the themes.

Mediation

Mediation is a broad and complex concept, and while space precludes a full discussion, this abridged definition from the *Companion Volume of CEFR* should suffice:

> the user/learner acts as a social agent who creates bridges and helps to construct or convey meaning, sometimes within the same language … sometimes from one language to another . … The focus is on the role of language in processes like creating the space and conditions for communicating and/or learning, collaborating to construct new meaning … and passing on new information in an appropriate form. (Council of Europe, 2020, p. 90)

Mediation accounted for 197 codes, descriptions and examples of the types of which are presented in Table 2.

Reflections were generally positive regarding pair/group work facilitating understanding. One example was "I didn't understand at first, but talking with my friends, I was like 'oh, that's it!' and the second time, it was surprisingly easy to understand, even the grammar". Some appeared quick to recognize the value of multiple viewpoints in mediating passages: "Pair work is limited with just two, so I would like to have maybe four working together". Reflections remained positive throughout the course: "I was exposed to ideas different from my own, we could notice each other's mistakes, and raise each other's level".

Another aspect of mediation was the retelling of passages, in which students began to verbalize the difficulty of navigating different languages and integrating understanding with output:

> I can listen in English and translate to Japanese for my own understanding, but it's difficult to translate my Japanese back into English … I want to be able to craft sentences that capture the flow of the story.

Later in the course, similar reflections showed greater refinement: "I want to be able to pay attention enough that I can retell the content in chronological order".

Perhaps because of the personal nature of reflection, the most prevalent code was *internal mediation*, characterized by the importance of critical thought: "I realized it is not enough to just listen … It is important to consider details and rethink them

Table 2

Mediation Codes, Descriptions, and Examples

Codes (number)	Description	Example
Pair/Group work (41)	Understanding/ questioning/analysis facilitated by collaboration.	"I found it easy to anticipate questions that might come up during pair work."
Retelling (41)	Reformulating input into comprehensible output.	"I can understand the content in Japanese, but putting that back into English requires more words than I can use."
Internal mediation (115)	Navigating linguistic/contextual information in relation to prior knowledge, applied to understanding.	"There were times when I didn't understand some of the words, but I was able to understand what was said better by guessing from the surrounding sentences."

myself". Reflections soon began to demonstrate understandings of the situated nature of language, the frequent indispensability of non-linguistic information, and the necessity of addressing gaps in knowledge: "I felt it was important not just to listen, but to make inferences from the content. For instance, I thought about the names of foods, 'Where are they from?' 'What are they made of?'".

Some reflections conceptually overlapped with the next theme, *decentering*, such as: "If one prediction is not correct, it disrupts all understanding. I want to correct this habit and try to think of different possibilities". Recall the parking example from TOEFL ITP and how this ability to reflect on preconceptions might help overcome non-linguistic barriers to understanding.

In mediation, language is "not just a means of expression; it is primarily a vehicle to access the 'other,' the new, the unknown – or to help other people to do so." (Piccardo et al., 2019, p. 21). In pedagogy, mediation encourages the mobilization of multiple participants' competences, bringing them together in negotiation and co-construction of knowledge. Even in standardized tests, mediation is important. For instance, TOEFL iBT integrated tasks require examinees to understand, amalgamate, and retell (potentially unfamiliar) content in their own words.

Similar reflections more specifically alluded to personal experiences and prior knowledge, engendering the *decentering* theme.

Decentering

Decentering (or decentration) was a core concept in Piaget's theory of how abstractions are developed through the process of moving beyond understanding phenomena solely in terms of subjective experience to developing more objective (i.e., socially, culturally, and scientifically informed) understandings (Piaget, 1962/2000). Decentering now informs much of the educational literature and has become a key concept in language education as a process through which learners update their linguistic and cultural schemas (see Piaget, 1926/2005). Users employ the schemas of their languages to frame and interpret the world, and second/foreign language learners often begin by employing their schemas in deciphering new languages. When languages (and individual experiences within cultural frameworks) differ greatly, such as between Japanese and English, applying only pre-established schemas to interpretation entails considerable limitations to be addressed and/or overcome. In other words, learners must engage in decentering.

One pedagogical resource that treats the concept of decentering in language teaching and learning is the *Framework of Reference for Pluralistic Approaches to Languages and Cultures* (FREPA; Candelier et al., 2012), which describes it as "a change of vantage point, seeing things in a relative way" (p. 23). FREPA was amongst the literature referred to when reviewing themes.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, as reflection sheets were free form and therefore not structured to elicit specific responses, codes related to decentering were limited, totaling just 47 (see Table 3). Nevertheless, analyses revealed interesting insights.

Familiarity/unfamiliarity codes showed a general trend: Passages set in Japanese (or otherwise familiar) contexts were easier to understand (e.g., "It was great for me as I live in the countryside as it was about Japan and the countryside". Others displayed

Table 3

Decentering Codes, Descriptions, and Examples

Codes (number)	Description	Example
Familiarity /unfamiliarity (35)	References to ease/difficulty of understanding as directly related to familiarity; importance in engaging with the unfamiliar.	"Although I know a little bit of news in general, I sometimes mistook the cities, so I wanted to understand it correctly."
Questioning of preconceptions (9)	Updating/questioning preconceived notions through engagement with content/mediation with others.	"[The narrator] seemed so masculine, climbing things and forgetting keys, etc. If it wasn't for the make-up, I would have thought she was a man. I thought it's not good to be prejudiced."
Other (3)	Attitudes/reflections related to decentering.	"It was a bit heavy, but I tried to think about it carefully and not think that it has nothing to do with me."

more specific understanding of how not-yet-acquired knowledge could facilitate comprehension (e.g., "It's important to know about international relations; if I'd known what was in the news, I could've solved the questions from that knowledge". Such reflections, many of which were indicative of a need to pay attention to the world outside of their immediate experiences, demonstrated a developing attitude defined in FREPA descriptor A10 as "the will to construct 'informed' knowledge/representations" (Candelier et al., 2012, p. 44).

This developing competence for decentering was overt in the questioning preconceptions code, such as in this example, regarding a passage set in the southern hemisphere: "I should pay attention to hints like reversed seasons, not just base my presumptions on the northern hemisphere." Similarly, regarding a passage set in Japan but relating childhood experiences of an adult immigrant, comes this example: "I heard Pokémon and instantly thought 'Japan,' but I should broaden my thinking and consider overseas contexts." Such reflections correspond to the FREPA descriptor A-9.2.3: "considering one's own representations … as objects about which questions may arise" (Candelier et al., 2012, p. 44).

Some reflections demonstrated analysis of individual interest as connected with ability and/or motivation: "The questions I find comparatively difficult are those that don't interest me, so I try to concentrate on them even if they don't interest me.". This kind of decentered self-analysis is essential in learning and also appeared to lead to renewed engagement in content.

Engagement

The final theme, *engagement* (see Table 4), was not specifically informed by theory but more inductively based on my own prior experiences of teaching with textbooks at the high school level and designated texts at universities.

Codes related to previous experiences with listening were common early in the course. Many compared tasks favorably to prior experiences: "For the first time I had to think about things not explicitly said, and it was really difficult, but interesting, and the first time I felt listening was fun". Later in the course, these reflections gave way to codes related to concentration, generally related to wavering attention over longer passages, or when "there was lots I didn't know about and it was long, which made it hard to concentrate". Nevertheless, such remarks were usually qualified by a desire to improve concentration. These related to comments that demonstrated perceived improvement over time, such as "I've really improved since the beginning! I was able to fully imagine the story the second time in today's listening", and consistent engagement throughout the course: "In the first class, when I heard it was long listening, I felt demotivated and panicky, but now I'm like 'bring it on!'".

This final theme seemed to be supported by the course design, which encouraged critical engagement with the passages, and not only appeared to increase enjoyment but also intimated a connection between theoretical decentering and mediation, and the students' learning.

Concluding Remarks

The compulsory listening-focused course in this study was designed to create "shared spaces that facilitate creativity, openness and mutual understanding" (Piccardo et al., 2019, pp. 23-24). It also sought to encourage critical engagement with the listening passages, which appeared to result in the facilitation of decentering (i.e., access to new "vantage points," as in Candelier et al., 2012) by having the students collaborate to derive answers that were not explicitly stated, applying whatever tools they had at their disposal to consider various contexts, familiar and unfamiliar, through the target language. Findings suggested a greater level of intellectual engagement

Table 4

Engagement Codes, Descriptions, and Examples

Codes (number)	Description	Example
Previous learning experiences/ ongoing experience (64)	Comparisons to previous learning experiences; shifts in perception of listening skills.	"It was the first time I had ever listened to a passage and had to think of my own answer."
		"I don't hate listening as much as I used to."
Concentration (19)	Reflections on the capacity to remain engaged.	"There was a lot I didn't know, so I lost my focus part way through."

than prior experiences had encouraged, an engagement supported by opportunities for mediation (see Council of Europe, 2020).

Present-day language teachers face dual pressures: the need to prepare students to deal with unfamiliar contexts through the application of unfamiliar language, which requires engagement with the unknown and with multiple viewpoints (Candelier et al., 2012), and the updating of linguistic and cultural schemas (Piaget, 1926/2005). At the same time, they must deal with standardized tests that can lead to reductive practices, such as the treatment of language as a mere set of lexical and grammatical knowledge to be learned through rote practice of test content. It is hoped that the present study might begin to shed light on how both objectives may be approached simultaneously.

While the results of this study were promising, it has several limitations. As an exploratory, qualitative study, it did not investigate how the practicing and learning (decentering and mediation) in the classroom might have impacted standardized test scores, which presents one avenue for further investigation. Another limitation was the small sample, which consisted of students from one department at a single university. From a qualitative perspective, structured reflection sheets that target (explicitly or implicitly) the theoretical constructs of course design could also lead to more robust results regarding students' learning, as could implementation of pre-and post-course questionnaires.

Nevertheless, it is hoped that the results of this preliminary study can provide insight as to how theory can be applied to practice and how, even under the pressures of testing, language educators can avoid the all-too-easy trap of rote teaching and begin to reconcile theory with institutional pressures in the pursuit of our primary responsibility: preparing learners to engage with an increasingly globalized and complex world that cannot be reduced to a simple set of lexical and grammatical items.

Notes

1. As a stark example, at Imjin River during the Korean war, when 650 British were facing 10,000 enemy troops and an American commander inquired as to their status, the British commander, employing typical English understatement (i.e., characterizing genuinely dire circumstances with light language, a cultural habit shared by some, but not all, Anglophone cultures), described the situation as "a bit sticky" (Mackenzie, 2013, p. 82). The British commander perhaps assumed that a shared language meant shared cultural norms as well. Unfortunately, this was not the case, and a literal description of the situation would likely have been better: Taking the British commander's statement at face value, the American commander deferred sending reinforcements, tragically resulting in the deaths of 610 British soldiers.

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Appendix: Example Listening Script and Questions

A Dying Culture?*

Kia Ora! Today I'm going to tell you about the Māori people and culture, who are a big part of our country. They first arrived about one thousand years ago, after crossing more than three thousand kilometers in canoes from the islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

This was a rich country for the Māori. There were many forests, and many birds and fish as well. The Māori brought plants with them, such as sweet potatoes and other crops. Māori houses were often only one large room, but they were strong and beautiful. Sometimes, different tribes of Māori would go to war with each other. On occasion, they would perform a type of war dance to frighten their enemies, to try to avoid battle.

After the Māori had been here for about 800 years, European settlers began to arrive. They also thought this was a rich country, and after 100 years of settling, they outnumbered the Māori people by more than ten to one. In 1900, there were less than fifty thousand Māori people. When they went to school, they had to use English, and were punished for using the Māori language. Many people thought that soon the Māori language and culture would die out.

But now, the number of Māori speakers is increasing. There are schools and universities where the Māori language is used. Māori can be heard on television and radio and seen on public signs. Māori is also used by people with no Māori heritage, and even my parents have started to use a little bit every day.

Māori is no longer a dying culture. It is recognized as something that makes our country unique. Some parts of Māori culture are now shared by everyone in the country. For instance, our national rugby team performs a *haka* before each of their matches. If you fly into our country, you will be greeted with a big sign saying 'Haere mai' in Māori. I hope you can visit one day and see the vibrant Māori culture in our country.

1. What country is the narrator from?
2. How many Europeans lived in the country in 1900?
3. About when did the Europeans arrive?
4. Is there more than one kind of Haka?
5. Is the narrator Māori?
6. What does the phrase 'Haere mai' mean?

**Adapted* in part from *Asian and Pacific Speed Readings for ESL Learners* (Quinn et al., 2017).