

# **The Schema of Listening**

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## Abstract

In the past, traditional listening classes in classrooms were notoriously ineffective at improving listening in real-world situations. This is part of the larger problem—especially in Japan—of treating a 2<sup>nd</sup> language as an academic subject that must be studied, rather than a real-world skill of developing strategies that is learned by use. Teaching listening as a traditional class is especially removed from what would actually improve the target skill because the way people listen to speech, songs, or movies or TV is to recognize the schema or situation and only partially listen to the details of the discourse. Teaching students to first recognize the situation can help them limit the realm of possibilities of what could be said to the point where hearing every word becomes unnecessary. Straining to hear and understand each word can actually be counterproductive, an exercise in frustration, and may actually reduce the listener's understanding of the message and impede the process of development of strategies. Using DVD's of contemporary TV dramas in second language classes give the opportunity to teach schema recognition in second language situations—sometimes in situations they may not be familiar with—and develop listening strategies. Using these DVD's has the added benefit of demonstrating contemporary use in a way that is also interesting to student.

## What is “Schema?”

In her article about her experiences in applying Schema Theory to her teaching of Special Education, Lise Hogan related her Language Acquisition professor's definition:

The way we remember something is to attach it to something we already know, especially something we already understand. It's kind of like naming a file on a computer when you go to save a document that you have typed. The name of the document has to make sense to you so you can go back and find it. (Hogan 1).



As this applies to the topic of this paper, when we are engaged in a conversation or exchange of information or are watching a movie or TV show, we first see the images of where the action is taking place, then we compare the situation at hand to something we have already experienced, then we predict the gist of the message and selectively filter out the unnecessary parts.

Unfortunately, this also brings to the fore what could be called “The General Problem of Second Language Classes.” This is that language is a skill used in daily life in the real world. Classroom language study is not the same as being in a real-world situation, but we believe that the skills cross over into the real world from what we do in the classroom.

### **Listening classroom management vs. developing a listening strategy**

The application of Schema Theory to second language instruction raises a number of issues. The first is the question of goals: is the goal of the instruction language knowledge or language competence? Second language instruction in Japan has traditionally had the goal of language knowledge, with language competence generally placed a distance second in priorities in classroom instruction. The second issue concerns the question of the Critical Period Hypothesis and how language learning (and instruction) changes with age.

The “Critical Period” Hypothesis essentially states that language acquisition, the automatic internalization of grammar and application of grammar rules to novel words, fades with age after puberty and is replaced with language learning, the rote memorization of chunks which are selected and replayed (Birdsong). The latter could be seen as part of an individual’s adult second language strategy.

Despite the observed evidence that the automatic application of grammar rules to novel words, pronunciation—and listening ability—all



plummet in adult learners, there continues to be a hot debate within the academic community whether or not there is a critical period.

Whether or not language acquisition does gradually fade as we get older and is replaced with language learning, we all develop strategies. Language strategies are the various techniques individuals develop to communicate in the second language using whatever understanding and skill they have. These can vary from individual to individual based on learning styles and are a form of operant learning.

Operant learning is the psychological term for learning that comes from “operating” or acting on the problems presented by one’s environment. We learn what works by doing, not memorizing what someone has told us is “correct.” This is how a first language is acquired. The reason a total immersion situation is best for kids or adults is because the learner must “sink or swim,” so they are forced to operant learn, rather than memorize. They seek functionality, rather than correctness. In the US, where there is the very real challenge of assisting immigrants in their assimilation into society, professional second language instruction in English for adults has steadily moved towards creating classroom instruction situations that attempt to recreate operant learning situations that mirror real life. I cut my teeth as an ESL teacher in Adult Education in LAUSD night school and I can attest to the veracity of the focus on functional competence, rather than language knowledge, in the teaching of immigrants in this “sink or swim” situation.

However, in general, classrooms and secondary educational institutions are not “real life” situations. Teachers have to give grades and measure progress in a linear fashion. Whereas in the real world, rewards are gained by completing real-world tasks, in a classroom, rewards are gained by acting like a “good student.” Students struggle to learn what the teacher wants and work within the parameters of what will get them a good grade. The classroom is an inherently artificial language environment made more artificial because it is within the even more artificial environment of an



academic university. What students directly learn is how to function within this artificial environment. They indirectly learn language that applies to the real world.

### **The schism between academia and the real world**

Especially in the case of a university, a language teacher most likely came from a literary world and lives in a kind of bubble. Unless the student is planning a career in academia, his or her world—and the world that his or her education is supposed to be preparing them for—is vastly different from that of the professor's.

The very nature of what a person should know to survive and prosper has changed. The notion of an accumulation of knowledge being key to a person's success and well being has been replaced by the need for the ability to access and sort through information that is used for a particular situation—then discarded. This is contrary to the traditional mind-set of a university and contrary to the role that academics assume when they become part of a faculty. Indeed the professor's idea of his or her purpose may not even be to prepare students for the real world. It may be to teach them things that he or she feels strongly about that are reflected in his or her choice of field of research. The source of the strength of this feeling can be nostalgia for the past, more literature-oriented world and/or negative feelings about the contemporary commerce and media-driven world. Though the teacher may have good intentions and even a romanticized view of his or herself as a kind of defender of "true values," this may not a good thing for the student. The student must compete and socialize in the contemporary world, not the nostalgic world of the past.

This raises a question beyond the scope of this paper, namely the practical value in today's world—the student's world—of a traditional university liberal arts education. Without delving that deeply into that larger



burning question, the more specific question is what do the students need and want to get out of a listening class? Specifically as it applies to listening, the student may want—and need—to be able to speak and hear a native speaker in a conversation and watch TV, an Internet broadcast, or movies in English without subtitles. In a world of international commerce, being able to communicate in English might mean the difference between getting a job that pays a living wage and one that has such low pay that the earner's life is severely limited. On a basic level, it may be a source of great anguish to them to not understand what is being said in a conversation with their peers.

When I was a teacher at Osaka Sangyo Daigaku Los Angeles I worked with groups of students from foreign countries to prepare them for study abroad in US High Schools. It was a source of great humiliation and consternation to the Japanese students—many of whom were top students in their high schools back in Japan—that their English conversation skills were so much poorer than the students from China, Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Peru, and Brazil. The Japanese students clutched their translators as if they were some sort of life-support system, whereas the students from other Asian countries rarely used theirs.

With regards to business, this consternation continues and also includes a very real daily terror: the telephone. Japanese business people have a terrible problem hearing and understanding English spoken on the telephone. They develop a strategy with the telephone that is so common they make jokes about it in conversation classes. When confronted with a telephone call, they dodge the situation by saying, "I'm a little busy right now, could you send me an e-mail?" In addition to the stress and humiliation they suffer, having a need for this sort of tactic puts them at a competitive disadvantage. So there is an urgent need to change English language instruction in Japan to bring speaking and listened skills up to par with other countries.



## Strategy-based instruction

The “I’m-busy-please-send-me-an-e-mail” trick employed by Japanese business people is a strategy to convert a real-world language listening situation (understanding a telephone conversation), for which they have received no education, into a more classroom-like one (reading), for which they are more prepared. That they would choose this strategy illustrates the inherent problem with teaching language as knowledge that is practiced, rather than as a skill that requires strategies.

John Field at Cambridge University makes a case for a rethinking of the way we teach language to emphasize teaching skills and strategies and use “authentic materials” (Field). This is echoed by Larry Vandergrift, professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Ottawa, and coordinator of the BA in Second Language Teaching. His research ties in the relationship between listening comprehension and learning strategies (Vandergrift). Jeremy Cross has reported that students tend to develop their own listening strategies more naturally when the classroom listening materials are videotapes of real news broadcasts, rather than classroom listening materials (Cross).

My own experiences, both as an adult learner of Spanish and Japanese and as an English teacher in environments where those languages were the first languages of the students, has convinced me that we need to change the way we teach ESL/EFL in a way that emphasizes schema recognition and listening strategies

So, other than teaching students to tell every English speaker who calls them on the phone that they are busy and “could you send me an e-mail?” how can we teach schema recognition and listening strategies?



## **TV drama shows on DVD: the ultimate language teacher's aid**

As Dr. Field urged, the starting point is to use “authentic materials.” My vote is for contemporary TV drama shows on DVD. Using new or recent TV drama shows to teach listening has many advantages. The first is that the language is contemporary. Listening class scripts are often written by academics, whose English may not be natural in a real-world sense. Also, in real situations, speech is often unclear. A speaker may be turned so he or she faces the listener indirectly—or even has his or her back to the listener. Natural speech is also full of extra sounds and is often made up of idioms or unfinished phrases—or is grammatically incorrect.

Though TV drama shows are fictionalized situations and are somewhat glamorized, they are generally made to represent contemporary life. The idioms and speech style are contemporary natural English, not “ESL speech” or old literary forms, so they are much more relevant to what the students have to cope with in their lives.

Another advantage is student interest. Traditional university classrooms are generally boring to students, so student interest is enforced by using the carrot and stick approach of good grades for being a “good” student and bad grades for a “bad” student. This is part of the artificiality described above. This has a somewhat positive effect on the student's learning of the language, but its main goal is classroom management: to keep the student acting like a “good student” in class and doing what the teacher wants. This is supposed to transfer to student's improvement in real-world language skills. However, unless the classroom consists of a conversation immersion situation, any transfer of skills is likely to be minimal. Students often just want to “get through it.”



## The Cultural Element

It is more difficult to recognize a schema (and therefore understand the general meaning of utterances from a somewhat limited auditory stream using visual clues) if the listening is not familiar with the situation.

For example, in my AD Listening class at Nanzan Tandai, I use the contemporary American TV drama, *Veronica Mars*. One episode showed flashbacks of a group of friends going to the senior prom in a limo together. They were engaged in underage drinking. Other flashbacks in the same episode included Veronica's father chiding her date for reserving a hotel room for the night of the prom.

Even though the dialogue was consistent with previous episodes, the students reported more difficulty hearing this episode. Of course, Japanese High Schools don't have a "Senior Prom," a graduation dance party. After I explained what this is, the students understood it better because they could apply Schema Theory: they compared it to the graduation party at Nanzan Tandai. Since many of them would have recently turned twenty years old, they could relate to the excitement and guilty pleasure of drinking at a young age. Even though they do not rent limousines, they could relate to the problem of having no privacy when they want to engage in sexual relations. They could certainly understand the need for a hotel room.

Here is where the value of TV drama show DVD's—and perhaps the saving grace of a classroom situation—becomes clear: the students got to see how people their own age live in a different culture and relate their own issues to that of their foreign peers. I was able to explain what a Senior Prom is and relate my own experience of renting a limo.

Japanese students may never rent a limo, so learning to recognize this schema may only be helpful when watching a movie or TV show. However, when the schema is recognizable because it is a situation common to all cultures, it becomes extremely useful as a tool in a language strategy.



I was in a restaurant in Japan with a date. I had ordered pasta and it arrived without any grated or powdered parmesan cheese on top or on the side to put on top. I wanted to ask the waiter for some. My Japanese is limited, but because of the schema, it was not necessary for me to have more than rudimentary skills. I simply said the word “Cheese-u?” and added the katakana Japanese sound to the English word with an upward intonation to mean a question. To make it very clear, I made a gesture of sprinkling grated cheese on the pasta. The waiter gave a very long-winded answer in Japanese and I nodded and said “OK.” He left and came back with the cheese. My date was amazed and asked me if I understood what he had said. I answered “No,” but I didn’t have to. In this schema, there were only three possible answers: “No, we don’t have any cheese to put on the pasta,” “Sure, I’ll get you some,” or “Yes, but, it costs extra money.” In the waiter’s long discourse I heard the words (in Japanese) “one hundred yen,” so it was not necessary for me to hear or understand anything else he said. He would only have quoted a price if his message was number three of the above: “Yes, but, it costs extra money.”

### **Teaching students to recognize schema and develop strategies**

While it might seem simple to teach students to first recognize the schema of a situation and then develop a strategy, it is actually quite challenging—for both the teacher and the student. This is because both need to rethink roles that have been burned into their brains since the first grade.

The hardest points to communicate are abstract ones. It is even more difficult to teach a behavioral abstract. The first point that must be made in using schema to teach listening is that the students should not concentrate on hearing at first, but rather they should watch and note what is going on visually. That is, they should understand the actions they see, not the words they hear.



The second challenge to the teacher is to let the students work independently to develop strategies. We as teachers think we should always be “teaching.” We are always explaining and guiding, telling the students how to think. The problem with this is that it interferes with the student’s development of the skill of developing strategies and by extension, real-world listening strategies

Developing a teaching method based on teaching strategy and skills and identifying schema involves empowering the students to take responsibility for their own learning. This mirrors the situation faced by a person living in a foreign country. They must develop their own strategy to figure out meanings. They must also stop thinking of English “study” as something that takes place in a classroom. To develop language strategies and competency in the language they must think beyond the classroom.

For this reason, and also because of classroom time constraints, it is optimal that students pursue listening activities outside the class. The pedagogy outlined below requires that students can have access outside of class to the DVD being watched. If there is a classroom that has a DVD player and TV where the DVD can be left, the students can come watch it on their own time. Another option for students is to rent or buy their own copies. This is another advantage of using popular contemporary drama shows: they may be readily available to rent or buy.

### **Classroom methodology**

TV drama shows are usually an classroom-convenient length: about forty-five minutes without the commercials. Ideally, there are three viewings of each episode. In the first viewing, students are asked to watch an episode without subtitles and simply write down what they see.

The reaction of students in my AD Listening class at Nanzan Tandai to such a simple and obvious task could be a paper in and of itself. The



returnee students who have lived and studied abroad have no problem with it. Of course, their listening ability and familiarity with life in other countries makes catching what is going on easier, but more than this, they adapt to a less-traditional classroom schema more easily.

Without recording formal statistical data, I can generalize and say that the high level Japanese students who have not studied abroad have the greatest difficulty—at least at first. One student, who I will call “S” was totally flustered by my request. I tried explaining it slowly and carefully and even showing her what I wanted, but she could not grasp the idea of not trying to listen, of instead writing down what she saw. She just kept saying “I can’t understand what they are saying.”

The students turn in papers with their writing and they vary considerably in style. Some just write impression in incomplete sentences, some actually draw little pictures of objects they see. Some write the first thing they saw and then trail off. But some who are not especially high level, get the idea and write quite a lot.

A second page is provided. This is for the second viewing. During this viewing they are to write down random words they hear without attempting to make sentences.

For the third viewing, students are asked to write down a more detailed recreation of the action, including describing the emotions of the characters.

In order to complete three viewings, they must watch the show in class and in their own time.

The result of this method has been dramatic. Many students begin by lamenting that they cannot understand anything of the show and gradually come to learn how to grasp the schema of what is happening and write it down. The amount they write increases steadily in volume and content.

Papers from the second and third viewing also gradually increase in length and students report greatly improved ability to hear words and understand the action.



## Epilogue

In summer of 2009 I took an extended trip to China. I booked at private English-speaking tourguide for my trip to the Dazu Rocks outside Chongqing. She was Chinese and spoke excellent English. Even more so, her speech was unusually natural and she could understand me very well. Living in Japan, I have gotten used to speaking a kind of “ESL teacher-speak” wherein I speak more slowly with more pauses between words, eschew natural idioms and expressions, and hyper-pronounce words. With this tourguide, I realized within a very short time that I didn’t have to do this with her. She understood my natural speech perfectly and even made jokes in idioms.

I assumed she had been in some sort of study abroad program and I asked her about it. She laughed and said “no.” She had accidentally created her own method of study. She was fascinated by the US and liked to buy bootleg copies of American drama shows (which were extremely cheap). She liked to see what fashions they were wearing and marveled at the beautiful homes in shows like *OC*. At first she couldn’t understand much of what was being said, but she discovered that if she watched the shows a second or third time, she could pick up more. She thought the slang sounded “cool” so she started writing down phrases she heard more than once and tried to imitate the delivery. Then when she started doing tours, she discovered that the English spoken by the Americans, Canadians, and Australians she met was a lot more like the English she had heard on the DVD’s than what she had studied in school.

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