

# Listening Comprehension Skills Teaching Methods in Japanese Tertiary Education: Referring to *Power-Up English <Pre-Intermediate>*

大学英語教育におけるリスニング指導  
—*Power-Up English <Pre-Intermediate>* を実例にして—

Masayo KANNO

神野雅代

## <Abstract>

The aim of this paper is to survey the listening comprehension exercises in the integrated English textbook for Japanese university students and suggest effective methods needed to improve the listening comprehension skills in Japanese English learners. Changes of sounds, elision and linking, etc. take place to make articulation smoother from one word to the next in connected speech, which, in turn, causes difficulties in listening comprehension for Japanese English learners. From amongst these, this paper has analyzed elision and linking and proposed methods aimed at training listening abilities of them.

**Key Words:** listening comprehension, teaching method, elision, linking

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the priority in English language education should have been placed on nurturing communicative ability according to the course of study (Gakusyu Shido Yoryo) of the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology. More focus on listening ability can be seen in Japanese tertiary educational settings. Changes of sounds, elision and linking, etc. take place to make articulation smoother from one word to the next in connected speech, which, in turn, causes difficulties in listening comprehension for Japanese English learners. From amongst these, this paper has analyzed elision and linking and proposed methods aimed at training listening abilities of them.

The textbook used in this class is an integrated English one for Japanese university students consisting of listening, reading, and grammar sections. Twenty to thirty minutes of each 90-minute lesson are dedicated to listening which is done as a unit wrap-up exercise. Listening exercises were elicited to survey the listening ability training in class and are discussed in Section 3. Suggestions on effective methods to improve listening comprehension skills in Japanese English learners are made in Section 4.

With regard to the students, all are university students with limited experience using English. Their English proficiency level varied from low-beginner to low-intermediate according to the results of a CASEC Test administered as a placement test and the EIKEN Test in Practical English Proficiency.

## 2. Regarding the Textbook

Title: *Power-Up English <Pre-Intermediate>*

Author: JACET Listening Research Group

Publication: February 12, 2015. Nan`undo

Number of total pages: 111

Number of total units: 24

Integrand parts of a unit:

Listening Section: 1 page

Reading Section: 2 pages

Grammar Section: 1 page

Listening Section consists of Listening Tips and three exercises which are dealt with in this paper.<sup>1)</sup> In Listening Tips, English sound features are explained explicitly in the form of phrases with a speech sound. Sound changes in formulaic sequence are dealt with extensively; first treated in the Listening Tips as phrases, and then in the exercises as conversations and depictions. According to Wray (2002: 9), formulaic sequence is “a sequence, continuous or discontinuous, of words or other elements, which is, or appears to be, prefabricated: that is, stored and retrieved whole from memory at the time of use, rather than being subject to generation or analysis by the language grammar.” The format of Exercise 1 is equivalent to that of Part I of TOEIC; that of Exercise 2 corresponds to Part II; that of Exercise 3 in the odd number of units, Part III, and that of Exercise 3 in the even-numbered units, Part IV.

## 3. Exercises Elicited from Listening Section

Among various connected speech phenomena, the majority of changes of sounds across word boundaries treated in the textbook are elision, linking, and assimilation. In this paper, elision, illustrated intelligibly in Units 4 - 6 in the textbook, is taken up in Section 3.1 and linking, explained simply in Units 7 - 9, is dealt with in Section 3.2.

### 3.1. Analysis of Elision

The teacher contrives to have students get acquainted with the sound changes in elision over and over in the exercises as shown below. The aural transactional sentences delivered in Exercise 1 (the task of picture questions) of Unit 5 are as follows:

- (1) (a) The passengers are leaving the airport.
- (b) The passengers are checking their baggage at the ticket counter.
- (c) The passengers are approaching the boarding gate.

(d) The passengers are going through the security checkpoint.

(The number and marks are mine)(Exercise 1 in Unit 5)

To analyze (1a) – (1d) in phonetic terms, *airport* in (1a) and *gate* in (1c) and *checkpoint* in (1d) have voiceless plosive /t/ at the end of each sentence. They may be released inaudibly, that is, the release may not be heard at their articulation. In the noun phrase *ticket counter* in (1b), the word-final plosive of the word *ticket* (/t/) is usually not released, for it is followed by *counter* beginning also with a plosive /k/. When it is articulated, the tongue moves to the place of articulation of the plosive, and moves to the place of next articulation of /k/.

The aural transactional sentences delivered in Exercise 2 (the task of question-responses) of Unit 5 are as follows:

(2) Are you going to visit Thailand next Christmas vacation?

(a) Yes, I had a great time.

(b) Yes, I'm really looking forward to it.

(c) Yes, Christmas is my favorite holiday. (The number is mine)(Exercise 2 in Unit 5)

In the verb phrase *visit Thailand* in question sentence (2), the ending of the *visit* and the beginning of the *Thailand* have identical plosives /t/, so that the first plosive is not released. This identical pattern can also be seen and explained in the noun phrase *great time* in the response sentence (2a). The sequence of *forward to* in (2b) has a homorganic plosive sequence with different voicing, that is, the ending of the *forward* is voiced and the beginning of *to* is voiceless, so that the first plosive is not released. In the noun phrase *next Christmas* in sentence (2), the word-final plosive of the *next* (/t/) is usually not released, for it is followed by *Christmas* beginning also with a plosive /k/ as described in *ticket counter* in (1b).

The aural transactional sentences delivered in Exercise 3 (the task of short conversations) of Unit 5 are as follows:

(3) M: Excuse me. May I have my in-flight meal now?

F: May I check your ticket, sir? I'm afraid your ticket doesn't cover any on-board meal.

M: I see. If I pay the meal charge now, can I get one?

F: Certainly, sir. Would you like a Japanese or a Western meal? We also have a vegetarian selection.

M: Could you tell me what's in them?

F: There's a small portion of soba and sushi in the Japanese meal, and sandwiches and a green salad in the Western meal. The vegetarian meal includes tomato bisque soup and garlic bread.

M: Then, I'll have the Japanese meal. I'll pay in cash.

F: All right, sir. Just a moment. I'll bring your meal to you right away.

(The number is mine)(Exercise 3 in Unit 5)

The sequence of *ticket doesn't* in conversation (3) has a homorganic plosive sequence with different voicing as mentioned in *forward to* in (2b), so that the first plosive is not released. In the sequence of *doesn't cover* in conversation (3), the word-final plosive of *doesn't (/t/)* is usually not released, for it is followed by *cover* beginning also with a plosive /k/ as discussed in *ticket counter* in (1b) and *next Christmas* in question sentence (2).

*Ticket, right* and *moment* in conversation (3) have voiceless plosive /t/. Since they come at the end of the sentences, they may be released inaudibly, that is, the release may not be heard at the articulation.

### 3.2. Analysis of Linking

The teacher utilizes the exercises to have students get acquainted with English sound patterns like linking, or various sequences of consonants and vowels across word boundaries repeatedly as shown below. When it occurs, the final consonant seems to be pronounced as part of the following syllable and word boundaries become unclear.

The aural transactional sentences delivered in Exercise 1 (the task of picture questions) in Unit 7 are as follows:

- (4) (a) The man is handing out a magazine to the women.
- (b) The man is reading a magazine on the street.
- (c) The man is holding up a magazine in his right hand.
- (d) The man is throwing a magazine into a dust bin.

(The number and marks are mine)(Exercise 1 in Unit 7)

Analyzing (4a) – (4d) in phonetic terms, alveolar /n/ is followed by word-initial vowel in the sequences of *man is* in (4a) – (4d), *magazine on* in (4b), *magazine in* in (4c), and *magazine into* in (4d). Alveolar /t/ is followed by word-initial vowel in the sequences of *out a* in (4a). The intervocalic /t/ which is pronounced like /d/, if the preceding vowels are stressed, is precisely dealt in Unit 23 as a characteristic feature in North American English. Velar /ŋ/ is followed by word-initial vowel in the sequences of *handing out* in (4a), *reading a* in (4b), *holding up* in (4c), *throwing a* in (4d). Labial /p/ is followed by word-initial vowel in the sequences of *up a* in (4c).

The aural transactional sentences delivered in Exercise 2 (the task of question-responses) in Unit 7 are as follows:

- (5) Hello. This is David. May I speak to Mary, please?
- (a) I don't know anyone named James.
- (b) Sorry, but she is on another line.
- (c) David's been talking on the phone for an hour already.

(The number is mine)(Exercise 2 in Unit 7)

Alveolar /s/ is followed by word-initial vowel in the sequences of *This is* in (5); /z/ is , in *is on* in (5b); /n/ is , in *on another* in (5b) and *an hour* in (5c); /r/ is, in *for an* and *hour already* in (5c). Velar /ŋ/ is followed by word-initial vowel in *talking on* in (5c).

The aural transactional sentences delivered in Exercise 3 (the task of short conversations) of Unit 7 are as follows:

(6) M: Hi, Yuki. You look really happy today. Did something special happen?

F: Yes, Peter. As you know, I've been a member of the Girl Scouts for a long time. Today, we asked people for donations for UNHCR and collected almost 20,000 yen.

M: Wow! That's a lot of money. You said UNHCR. What's that?

F: It's an organization under the United Nations that works for refugees who have had to leave their countries or homes.

M: You must be proud of yourselves.

F: Yes, we are, and really pleased, too. Lots of people said "Ganbatte!" to us, which means "Good luck!" The word made me really happy.

(The number is mine)(Exercise 3 in Unit 7)

Alveolar /n/ is followed by word-initial vowel in the sequences of *been a*, *an organization*, and *organization under*; /d/ is, in *collected almost* and *proud of*; /t/ is, in *lot of*; /z/ is, in *countries or* in (6).

#### 4. Suggestions of the Listening Skills Teaching Methods

To overcome the difficulties in listening comprehension for Japanese English learners, it seems important for teachers to have students get accustomed to the formulaic sequences in class, practice these repeatedly while being aware of the English sound patterns and changes in them.

##### 4.1. Teaching Methods in Elision

Three listening comprehension training techniques using formulaic sequences are proposed here for teachers to use in class enabling students to better understand the sound changes in the elision treated in Units 4 - 6.

▶ Mark the inaudible letters in terms of elision and practice the pronunciation.	
① get together	② looking forward to
③ good morning	④ club sandwich

Figure 1. Exercise to mark the inaudible letters

In Figure 1, the teacher first has the students mark the inaudible letters in parentheses, then make them aware of the English sound changes, such as the alveolar plosive being replaced by a glottal stop when

followed by bilabial /m/ as in *good morning*, and two geminate consonants being pronounced in a single articulation of double length as in *get together* in Figure 1. Finally, the students work in pairs or groups to check the pronunciation with each other several times.

► Fill in the blanks in terms of elision and practice the pronunciation.

① ge\_\_ \_\_ together                      ② looking forwar\_\_ \_\_o

③ goo\_\_ morning                          ④ clu\_\_ sandwich

(Answer: get together, looking forward to, good morning, club sandwich)

Figure 2. Exercise to complete the formulaic sequences

In Figure 2, listening to the teacher’s pronunciation, students fill in the blanks to complete the formulaic sequences and practice the pronunciation repeatedly with being aware of the elision.

► Fill in the blanks to make sequences in terms of elision and practice the pronunciation.

① (            \_\_ ) (            \_\_ )

② (            \_\_ ) (            \_\_ )

③ (            \_\_ ) (            \_\_ )

④ (            \_\_ ) (            \_\_ )

(Sample answer: good night, ought to, get down, climbed back)

Figure 3. Exercise to make formulaic sequences

In Figure 3, students first make word sequences in terms of elision, listening to the teacher’s pronunciation and then pronounce a group of words which sound like one word with no break over and over.

#### 4. 2. Teaching Methods in Linking

Three listening comprehension training exercises using formulaic sequences are proposed here for teachers to use in class in order to make students aware of sound changes in the consonant to vowel linking treated in Units 7 - 9.

► Mark the letters in terms of linking with slur ( ~ ) and practice the pronunciation.

(5) Hello. This is David. May I speak to Mary, please?

(a) I don’t know anyone named James.

(b) Sorry, but she is on another line.

(c) David’s been talking on the phone for an hour already.

Figure 4. Exercise to mark the letters linked

In Figure 4, the teacher first has the students mark the letters in terms of linking in slur, then make them

aware of the sound changes, such as the C + V sequence moving the final consonant over to the next syllable and making the word boundary indiscernible as in *for an hour* in Figure 4, and finally the students work in pairs or groups to check the pronunciation with each other several times.

► Fill in the blanks in terms of linking and practice the pronunciation.

① \_\_\_\_\_ p  
 ② \_\_\_\_\_ p  
 ③ \_\_\_\_\_ p  
 ④ \_\_\_\_\_ p

Hints in Japanese: shoshin suru, ayumi yoru, atatakaku naru, hare wataru  
 Hints in English: step, walk, warm, clear  
 (Sample answer: clear up, warm up, walk up, step up)

Figure 5. Exercise to complete the formulaic sequences

In Figure 5, students first fill in the blanks to complete the formulaic sequences considering the meaning and spelling by the given hints, and then practice the pronunciation over and over while being cognizant of the linguistic form such as the word-final consonant followed by word-initial vowel.

► Fill in the blanks to make phrasal verbs in terms of linking and practice the pronunciation.

① [n] + [vowel]: \_\_\_\_\_ n out  
 ② [k] + [vowel]: \_\_\_\_\_ k out  
 ③ [d] + [vowel]: \_\_\_\_\_ d out  
 ④ [p] + [vowel]: \_\_\_\_\_ p out

Hints: tachiiri kinshi, sashi dasu, boppatsu suru, naku naru  
 (Sample answer: run out, break out, hold out, keep out)

Figure 6. Exercise to complete the formulaic sequences

In Figure 6, students first fill in the blanks to complete the formulaic sequences considering the meaning and spelling by referring to the hints, and then pronounce a group of words which sound like one word with no break repeatedly.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Students remaining at the beginners' level often read or speak English word by word, so it is plausible that repetition of the formulaic sequences helps develop their listening abilities.<sup>2)</sup> The teacher might help students become accustomed to the formulaic sequences, endeavor to have them speak without separating words, and have them practice over and over while being aware of the sound changes in elision and linking.<sup>□</sup> There is fairly general agreement that through the repetition of the pronunciation practice, word recognition speeds up gradually, enabling the processing of words to be done more

rapidly. In other words, words are recognized automatically, which lessens the loads of foreign language processing while students are listening. Further research concerning listening and other related training methods should be conducted so that effective methods of improving listening comprehension skills can be cultivated.

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### Notes

- 1) Regarding the gist of *Power-Up English <Pre-Intermediate>* and the constituent of the Listening Section, see Kanno (2016).
- 2) Effects of the conduction of Listening Section is presented by JACET Listening Research Group at the poster session of JACET 54<sup>th</sup> International Convention in 2015.

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