

## **Focused Listening: Description of a Model for a Balanced Listening Curriculum in an EAP Programme**

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### **Abstract**

In an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) setting, students are expected to develop a sophisticated mix of listening skills to digest academic content that is intellectually challenging even in their L1. A balanced listening curriculum would combine 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processing skills in one curriculum. Due to the highly individual nature of listening habits, much of this training is best done in an independent learning situation, defined here as a situation in which learners complete a series of activities on their own, in an environment and at a time largely of their own choosing. During the first three years of operation of Akita International University, the authors of this document developed and implemented just such a model for building skills in academic listening and independent learning. Referring to the listening curriculum as practiced in the AIU EAP from 2004 to 2007, the authors will describe the Focused Listening course model used at AIU during that period of time. First, we will provide an overview of Focused Listening courses at AIU. Then, components of a balanced listening curriculum will be discussed followed by various aspects of the construction of listening materials.

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### **Overview of Focused Listening at AIU from 2004 to 2007**

From its inception in 2004, the English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme at Akita International University (AIU) has placed great importance on the building of listening skills through its Focused Listening (FL) classes. During the first three years of the operation of EAP Focused Listening classes were offered in each of the three levels of the AIU EAP programme, Level One being for students with up to a 459 TOEFL score, Level Two for those with a score between 460 and 479, and Level Three for students with a 480 or greater. The Focused Listening courses in levels one and two had four 50-minute classes each week, and level three had three 50-minute meetings. These classes were held in one of AIU's Language Laboratories that contains 25 study carrels, each with a PC connected to AIU's intranet, and the Internet. Through this system, students had access to shared class files containing syllabus information as well as assignment worksheets and mp3 audio files for class assignments. Using the media player software installed in the computers, students independently controlled the playback of audio files and had the opportunity to listen to individual tracks as many times as they find necessary to successfully complete an exercise. Students spent the majority of time in class working independently. Assignments were lengthy and meant to be finished as homework. Periodically the instructor used some class time for discussion and explanations. However, for the most part, during class the instructors were available as facilitators and resource people, answering questions, offering advice, distributing and collecting homework assignments, conducting quizzes, and coping with technical problems as they arose.

## **A Bottom-up/Top-down Approach for Overall Balance**

Two main components of the listening curriculum described below are 'Deep Listening,' a 'bottom-up' transcribing approach (Clark, 1993), and 'top-down' Academic Lecture Note Taking. Experience and anecdotal evidence collected by the authors during the time period in which this approach was used at AIU tend to indicate that the approach to combine 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' processing in a curriculum functions to develop students' listening skills in a balanced way

For our purposes, a working definition of bottom-up processing is the word-level linear processing of a piece of spoken language through transcription with the goal of accurately recording and comprehending the whole (Mendelsohn, 1994). Rost (2002) makes a further distinction within this linear processing by breaking it down into speech perception and word recognition. According to Rost, these bottom-up processes 'provide the "data" for comprehension'. To define top-down processing, we refer to Mendelsohn's (1994) description of the process as 'holistic' and 'interpretive', building a model of meaning that's based on what's heard and then putting that information into context and interpreting it using prior knowledge. Andersen & Lynch (1988) provide a useful summary of the basic difference between bottom-up and top-down processing by describing the former as 'listener as tape recorder' and the latter as 'listener as model builder'. Mendelsohn (1994) advocates using a mix of these two approaches, leaning more toward top-down processing, but providing both to better meet a broad range of training needs in a balanced way. Our FL curriculum departs from Mendelsohn's recommended approach in that we put a somewhat greater emphasis on bottom-up processing.

## **Core Components of Focused Listening Classes**

The two core components of the FL curriculum were 'Deep Listening' and 'Academic Lecture Note Taking.' These two components were meant to exercise the two types of processing, bottom-up and top-down respectively, using two distinct sets of listening activities. Through the course of a week, students were assigned one unit each of Deep Listening and academic-lecture note taking exercise units. In addition to these core components a few days of the term were spent on TOEFL listening practice since a student's TOEFL score is a deciding factor for promotion to the next level.

### *Bottom-up Processing Through Deep Listening*

Bottom-up processing as exercised through Deep Listening was inspired by the 'Ango Kaidoku system' as conceived by Gregory Clark (1993, 1996), and further developed by the authors of this article (Hoskins, Maeda, & Johnson, 2006). Aside from being an intriguing name, the term Deep Listening is intended to convey to students the idea that they need to concentrate deeply while working through the exercises, especially the lecture-dictation section, of each unit. In the AIU Focused Listening classes, Deep Listening took the form of a collection of units of dictation-based activities using academic and/or study skills content based on subject matter of concurrent EAP courses presented on digital audio files, and on-line electronic and paper worksheets. Each unit was divided into three sections: (1) pre-deep listening activities; (2) Deep Listening, i.e. dictation followed by reflective listening activities; and (3) post-deep listening activities. Pre-deep listening exercises activated any prior knowledge related to the topic students may have had by having students work in various ways with important vocabulary, and to 'warm-up' the listening apparatus for further listening. The Deep Listening dictation exercise involved transcribing while listening to an academic lecture followed by carefully correcting the transcription and then listening reflectively while reading the self-corrected transcription. Post-listening activities provided consolidation through additional student-directed vocabulary-building, short writing exercises, comprehension and discussion-based activities and dictogloss exercises. Each completed unit was turned in to the instructor who provided

feedback in the form of comments and scores (for those sections not self-corrected by the students).

Content was deliberately written or chosen for adaptation from texts and content-based subject matter used in the students' other EAP classes. This allowed students greater opportunities to recycle knowledge, vocabulary, and concepts dealt with in their other coursework through highly focused listening activities. A cross-section of faculty members' voices were used in making audio recordings, allowing students to both become familiar with the voices and speaking mannerisms of their instructors while experiencing a wide range of English language accents.

Reliance on dictation for listening training in foreign language acquisition (FLA) and second language acquisition (SLA), such as that described above, has a long history. Rost (2002) refers to it as the 'prototypical intensive listening activity'. Other researchers (e.g. Cohen, 1994; Buck, 1992) have pointed out the superiority of dictation as an integrative exercise of listening due to its inclusion of listening along with the processing of grammar, vocabulary, and making inferences from context. Certainly the amount of variations on the basic theme of dictation is a testament to both its longevity and utility. Along with the dictogloss technique developed by Merrill Swain (1995) which requires students to listen to a short passage, discuss its contents in a group, and paraphrase the information orally or in writing, we find fast-speed dictation, pause and paraphrase dictation, listening cloze (fill-in-the-blank) dictation, error identification, and jigsaw dictation, which requires students to also put dictated sentences into a logical order (Rost, 2002).

What distinguished Deep Listening from other dictation exercise types is that rather than being one type of exercise, it was a balanced array of various forms of dictation, utilising: cloze dictation; dictation of single vocabulary items, of single sentences, and of full texts; and dictogloss, which includes elements of pause and paraphrase dictation. Another distinguishing factor was the use of reflective listening in which students, after completing the DL dictation, listen again while reading through their self-corrected dictations, highlighting or otherwise noting those words and phrases that were previously incomprehensible, and experiencing them again, thus providing aural as well as visual and kinesthetic confirmation.

### *Top-down Processing*

Top-down processing was implemented through the use of a collection of standard academic-style lectures from a variety of academic subjects presented in digital audio files with (1) pre-listening activities, including various vocabulary building exercises, questions designed to stimulate thinking about the topic, and note taking tips (2) academic-lecture note taking, first focusing on main ideas, the gist, and later on details, and (3) post-listening activities, including a quiz with discreet-point-type multiple choice questions and short essay writing. Students rely on their lecture notes to complete the quizzes. The texts Contemporary Topics I, II, III were most often used for this component of the course.

## **Balance through Instructional Design**

### *Student-Centered Learning: Balancing Responsibilities of Teachers and Students*

As mentioned previously, while Focused Listening classes included regular interaction between the instructor and students and among students, most of the time students worked on class assignments individually using notepaper and hardcopy or on-line document worksheets, along with audio files and exercise keys available in a shared computer file. This instructional design lends itself well to a student-centered approach. For this course, students took significant responsibility for managing their working time and to a significant extent for monitoring their own progress toward goals set in the class syllabus. The instructor acted as a work-flow supervisor and resource person, setting policies and procedures for the class; creating the syllabus with a

schedule of assignments; developing and disseminating materials; monitoring the progress of students; building, organising and maintaining shared materials files in the language laboratory computer system; regularly providing class-related information through in-class explanations and announcements; and offering feedback in the form of comments, discussions, and the marking of assignments, quizzes, and tests. At the same time, students were responsible for keeping up with the assignments, and for checking and scoring some portions of their own exercises and submitting their score data to the instructor. Between the time assignments were given and were due, students decided for themselves how to structure the time they spend working on the various Focused Listening assignments. Study materials were made available well in advance of their assignment due dates, and students could work ahead of the class schedule if they choose to do so.

### *Positive Climate for Learning: Balance of Sense of Ownership*

The student-centered approach to the Focused Listening instructional design with its strong emphasis on independent learning had an empowering effect on students. Students were given both the responsibility and freedom to choose how they went about achieving the goals of the class. Parameters for performance, due dates of various assignments, and criteria for scoring exercises, quizzes, and class grades were clearly presented and consistently followed, and students had the responsibility to perform within those limits. At the same time, within those boundaries, students made choices about what they would do, when and how they would do it, and in reflection, judgments about how well they accomplished their goals. In the process of making choices about how to do a task or set of tasks and exercising judgments about their success, there is a natural movement toward awareness of one's own reasons for wanting to accomplish the tasks, which in turn encourages internalisation of those goals. That internalisation, in turn, strengthens motivation, a feeling of 'being in the driver's seat' of one's own learning. All of this can be empowering.

Since responsibility for aspects of performance was shared between the instructor and the students, the relationship between them could take a less hierarchical, more collegial form. Students accustomed to a more traditional teacher-centered education generally seemed to appreciate a more equal distribution of roles and find the sort of working relationship inherent in a student-centered class to be refreshing and motivating. At the same time, there was a psychological comfort in having set parameters and in being able to receive individualised support and guidance by the instructor made possible by the course design. The evaluation system could progressively penalise late or incomplete assignments if the instructor saw a necessity to do so. However, while there were some negative inducements for non-performance pushing from behind, there were no structural impediments lying ahead that would in any way tend to slow students' progress through the exercises.

### *Anchored Instruction*

Following Bransford (1990) and Bransford & Stein (1993), each unit of exercises was built around a lecture that serves as a 'macro context for teaching' (Bransford, 1990, p. 140). All FL exercises worked with the content, structure, and vocabulary in the lecture providing a means of integrating and reinforcing learning experiences. The original materials produced by instructors that are mainly bottom-up in nature related to the authentic academic text being used in students' core classes. Commercially available text/CD listening materials for note taking which are basically top-down in nature dealt with a variety of academic subjects students may encounter in university classes after their EAP courses.

### ***Balancing Types of Input to Foster Cognitive Flexibility***

Cognitive flexibility is the ability to process the same input in a variety of forms or ways. Input that is multimodal is 'likely to be processed more thoroughly and be retained in a more meaningful way,' (Spiro, Coulson, Feltovich & Andersen, as cited in Rost, 2002, p. 105); and encourages cognitive flexibility (Spiro et al., cited in Rost, 2002; Clark & Paivio, 1991). Multiple representations of content various forms in Focused Listening, such as texts, audio files, and graphic images, provided learning experiences that are more stimulating, memorable and enjoyable. In the process of doing a unit of Deep Listening exercises or of academic-lecture note taking, students repeatedly encountered vocabulary, expressions, and related pieces of information through a variety of listening tasks and work with a body of content in a variety of ways, thus stimulating cognitive flexibility.

### **Construction of Deep Listening Materials and the Delivery System**

For the Deep Listening materials, elements such as the basic dictation text, worksheets, and answer keys were written using Microsoft Word; class records for Deep Listening assignments were organised and completed using Microsoft Excel. Student worksheets that are more conveniently completed by hand were printed out and distributed to students. Worksheets that required typing, notably the Deep Listening dictation itself, were made available as on-line documents that students accessed and copied out of a shared file on the class intranet.

Recordings were made using portable computers with quality microphones and an audio interface to turn the recorded sound into digital information for downloading and processing on the computer. Voice talent was recruited from among the AIU faculty providing a variety of speakers and accents. After compiling and editing audio files in the computer, sound files were converted to mp3 format and made available for student access from folders in the class intranet shared file. All computers in the AIU Language Laboratory automatically opened either Windows Media Player or Real Player as the default media player for sound files, and both players have similar interfaces that are equally easy to control allowing students to conveniently stop and start recordings or freely move the 'playhead' forward and backward through the sound file. While most students brought their own headphones or earphones for listening, headphones were made available for students to borrow during the class time. Audio files and text answer keys for note taking were downloaded into the computer. Students used the textbook for completing those exercises.

### **Conclusion**

The idea of using a sequence of exercises that develop listening skills in a balanced way is intuitively appealing, and relevant literature on instructional design of listening training as well as the direct experience of the authors of this article tend to support the contention that such balance is not only preferable, but essential if students are to be given an adequate skill base with which to meet the challenges of academic listening and independent learning in a second language. Based on the experience of using the curriculum model and instructional materials described above the authors of this article would contend that the Focused Listening model used at AIU between 2004 and 2007 provides a way of achieving an effective overall balance in listening skill development. As the authors are no longer associated with AIU and its EAP, organised collection of data on the efficacy of this model will not be immediately forthcoming, and more study is going to be required to further substantiate the validity of this model. However, the collective experience of the authors and students who engaged in the use of the Focused Listening approach suggests that this model is worth further development and use.

## **The Authors**

Christopher Hoskins graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Speech Communications-Public Relations in 1982 and with a Master of Arts in Linguistics in 1985, both degrees earned at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale in the U.S.A. Since coming to Japan in 1985, he has worked at a variety of 'international' colleges and universities throughout the country, specialising in English for Academic Purposes, and particularly self-guided listening training. Further interests include CALL and self-study materials development. Chris is currently working in the English Language Programme at International Christian University.

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