

What do Students Hear Instead of a Correct Phrase?

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In order to increase the power of listening of false beginners like college freshmen, two different or opposite approaches must be taken simultaneously, i.e. macro and micro listening. By macro listening, I mean the type of listening in which students are recommended to listen to a certain radio or TV program every day, no matter how little they understand at the onset. In this case, their entire attention is directed towards grasping the content, and grammatical points are almost never questioned. It takes at least three months until they start recognizing certain words or phrases—or even sentences—that appear over and over again. This is absolutely necessary for students to get used to the speed, intonation, the tone of voice and all other paralinguistic features of English. On the other hand, I use micro listening to refer to the type of listening in which students are instructed by teachers as to certain characteristics of English pronunciation—in particular, to the sounds that appear differently to the novice's ear, as well as to certain grammatical points which students usually do not pay attention to, such as articles, numbers and prepositions. It may well be awkward to talk about a 'novice' after students have already learned English for six years, but as far as the skill of listening is concerned, this is new to most of the students.

The very first stumbling block a beginning student faces in a university listening class can be seen in the following incident. Right at the beginning of the year, a student once said to me, "Even the word 'kyatto' (as pronounced by most of the students meaning 'cat') doesn't sound like 'kyatto'. They pronounce the word completely differently from what I have learned." Indeed, unless the teacher calls attention to certain features of pronunciation that sound differently from what one expects, the students will have to spend a long time in vain trying to learn about liaison, reduction and other features. In this way, the present study aims to find out what aspects of native speaker pronunciation hinders comprehension for Japanese false-beginner students, and in part, the comprehension of high school English teachers. The focus of this study can be summarized in the following core questions: What are factors prevent learners of English particularly in listening from perceiving words or chunks of words in a sentence? If students do not catch the correct words, what do they in fact hear instead? These questions are then further subdivided into the following set of sub-questions:

1. Is it the case that they cannot hear particular sounds in particular environments; e.g. reduction of vowel sounds due to lack of stress?

2. When students do not know a certain word, can they still hear approximately what the word sounds like, or do they associate the sounds to whatever they already know as a meaningful word? Which is more likely and why?
3. To what extent does neglect of grammar, or lack of grammatical knowledge, have to do with listening?
4. To what extent does some particular knowledge about English or lack of it have to do with listening? That is to say, when the students hear something, does their knowledge about English tell them "I must be hearing something wrong, since this does not exist in English as far as I know"? Is there any interference from their native language, Japanese, but, in this case not from the phonological system, but from the underlying logic of the language?
5. Students will hear better if they are given just one word in a phrase, or one set phrase in the form of a sentence, rather than two or three words in a longer sentence. To what extent does this hold true?
6. Do high school teachers of English hear the same way as students?

Such problems have been of concern to me since I started teaching listening in college, and I now had the opportunity to explore them further.

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

To address those questions, I administered in February 1997 a listening test using Units 20, 21 and 23 from Oxford University Press's *Expanding Tactics in Listening* in two of my listening classes with a B average in the standardized University of Tsukuba English Placement Test. A total of 80 students attended class on that day. Both classes consisted of humanities majors, who are fairly positive in their learning attitudes. The test was made up of forty-four items selected to address different aspects of the above questions. The students were given long passage scripts with the various blanks, represented below in bold block letters. They had already studied the text they were being tested on, so they were supposed to be fully prepared for the test. Theoretically, they could have learned all the passages by heart if they desperately wanted a perfect score, but apparently nobody had done that! There were no students who had any experience of living abroad, although some of them had been on a trip abroad for a week or two. The students each had a tape. The listening passages were recorded on their tapes, before they were told to listen to the tape for half an hour. During this time, they could rewind and listen to any parts they wished to hear again. The total length of the test tape was eight minutes, and the entire test took about forty minutes.

The listening test was also administered in July 1998 to about 50 junior and senior high school English teachers from various places in Japan who were attending the annual teacher development

seminar held at the Foreign Language Center. I thus had the opportunity to administer the same test with the same procedure to a different group from the students. This allowed some comparison of results, which has proven to be extremely insightful. I will return to this point later in this paper.

STUDENT DATA

In the data below, words or phrases including pseudo words that appeared more than twice in the student data are given with the number of occurrences numerically indicated. Those words or phrases including pseudo words appearing only once were grouped together as *Other*. *NR* stands for "not responded." In a few cases, word-form variations were grouped as one mistake. For instance, in Question 36 where the correct answer is *playwright*, the following types of mistakes were counted as equal: *play writer* 22 *playwriter* 11 *play-writer* 4 = total 37. Comments are given only where interesting phenomena are perceived.

- 1) I think it's a great way for people to develop pride **in their** country.
- | | |
|----------------|--|
| <i>Correct</i> | 43 |
| <i>NR</i> | 2 |
| <i>in the</i> | 13 |
| <i>in a</i> | 7 |
| <i>in our</i> | 7 |
| <i>Others</i> | <i>on your, own your, their own, in there, inside, at my, united</i> |

Comment: Anything that follows an [n] tends to be difficult unless the students are instructed as to what to expect. 16 students (*in a* - 7, *in our* -7, *on your, own your*) failed in catching the [ð] after the [n] since the point of articulation is the same for these two sounds.

2. I can make people feel good **about** themselves and their team (continued in 3)
- | | |
|----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Correct</i> | 76 |
| <i>NR</i> | 2 |
| <i>Others</i> | <i>solve, both</i> |
3. (continued from 2) and I think that's a very **positive** thing.
- | | |
|----------------|--|
| <i>Correct</i> | 72 |
| <i>NR</i> | 3 |
| <i>Others</i> | <i>perserble, pan of, puzzle, interesting, president</i> |
4. Well, the problem with it is that it doesn't **help** develop a country.
- | | |
|----------------|-------------|
| <i>Correct</i> | 77 |
| <i>NR</i> | 0 |
| <i>help to</i> | 2 |
| <i>Others</i> | <i>have</i> |

5. It brings in **a lot of** money.
Correct 54
NR 1
a lot 6
in a lot 11
a lots 2
Others *lot, in lot, around, amount, plenty*
6. I don't mind them, because many **of them** are really very entertaining.
Correct 70
NR 2
of that 3
Others *of the them, of money, things, them*
7. I can't see anything useful **in it**.
Correct 71
NR 5
any 4
8. **I mean**, can you see any point in trying to find out if there's life out there?
Correct 65
NR 6
any 3
and in 2
A mean 2
Others *and you, anney*
9. Well, if anyone is crazy enough to try it, **let them**.
Correct 43
NR 12
let on 5
Others *less than, listen, lets them, reapton, let some, selcome, left them, left off, let him, Elipton, repon, repcome, let's do, wrepp on, let from*
- Comment: The difficulty in this case comes from the grammatical surprise for the novice that "let them" ends just there, without anything following it. Students should also be instructed as to the elision of the [t] before the [ð].
10. Who would want to jump off a high bridge with just a rope **tied around** their legs?
Correct 62
NR 0
tied round 3
tide around 9
tied on 2
Others *tyde around, around, tied out*

Comment: If the spelling problems are disregarded, 76 students got this one almost correct.

11. Well, they are great company, especially for people who **live alone**.

<i>Correct</i>	52
<i>NR</i>	3
<i>live around</i>	11
<i>live on</i>	3
<i>lives alone</i>	2
<i>Others</i>	<i>laborowner, lived onnr, live along, lived on, never around, live in a land, living alone, develope, never long</i>

Comment: 18 students (live around, live on, and others) failed in hearing the [l] in "alone". A classic example of the [l] and [r] problem.

12. It can even **lower** your blood pressure.

<i>Correct</i>	16
<i>NR</i>	5
<i>know</i>	33
<i>low</i>	10
<i>though</i>	3
<i>on</i>	3
<i>Others</i>	<i>no off, lover, wo, more, no, row, loan, now, bring, leave</i>

Comment: The greatest difficulty in this case, again, is the [l] preceded by an [n]. As in Question 1, the point of articulation is the same for [n] and [l], and therefore the two sounds appear the same to the novice's ear. Another difficulty is that the word "lower" is not in the students' vocabulary.

13. Well, space exploration is **pretty** expensive.

<i>Correct</i>	79
<i>NR</i>	0
<i>Other</i>	<i>pritty</i>

14. That's how we learn more about the **universe we** live in

<i>Correct</i>	34
<i>NR</i>	2
<i>universe</i>	21
<i>university</i>	13
<i>universe to</i>	2
<i>universal</i>	4
<i>universary</i>	2
<i>university we</i>	2
<i>Others</i>	<i>univercity, university that, university you</i>

Comment: Almost everybody heard this one right up to the point "univers.... ", but then only 34 students got the meaning of the sentence right. Possibly the students are affected by an overlearned grammar rule that relative clauses always come with a 'which' or some other relative pronoun.

15. **How come?**

<i>Correct</i>	79
<i>NR</i>	0
<i>Other</i>	<i>How can</i>

16. People should just live together **for a while**.

<i>Correct</i>	63				
<i>NR</i>	2				
<i>for while</i>	5				
<i>full while</i>	1	<i>full flowe while</i>	1	<i>full well</i>	1
<i>followered</i>	1	<i>follow wife</i>	1	<i>follow wild</i>	1
<i>Others</i>	<i>for a wile, from away, among them, for a whole</i>				

Comment: Since this is a well-studied set phrase, the results were rather good. Mistakes occurred when students omitted an "a", or did not hear the difference between "for a" and "follow". Only 6 students heard [l] instead of [r].

17. I can't wait for the **next ones**.

<i>Correct</i>	69
<i>NR</i>	0
<i>next once</i>	6
<i>next one</i>	3
<i>next month</i>	2

18. Well, they encourage **an interest** in sports.

<i>Correct</i>	21
<i>NR</i>	1
<i>interesting</i>	22
<i>interest(s)</i>	14
<i>in interest(ing)</i>	6
<i>interested</i>	11
<i>an interests</i>	2
<i>Others:</i>	<i>intaroot, a interest, and interesing</i>

Comment: It was the most surprising and at the same time illuminating case of all the items. Only two students missed the word "interest" in various forms, but then only 21 of them got it right. In the students' vocabulary, they have "interesting" and "interested", or "interest" without the article. It shows very clearly that listening is not listening for sounds, but it is a mental process of matching what the students already have in their mental lexicons with what they think they are hearing.

19. Well, because they can **raise** money for the city.

<i>Correct</i>	66
<i>NR</i>	0

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<i>rase</i>	4
<i>rise</i>	6
<i>Others</i>	<i>rais, reise, raize, lazy</i>

20. Why **do you** say that?

<i>Correct</i>	53
<i>NR</i>	0
<i>you</i>	17
<i>did you</i>	4
<i>would you</i>	2
<i>will you</i>	2
<i>you'll</i>	2

21. So **you're all for** smoking in public?

<i>Correct</i>				38	
<i>NR</i>				1	
<i>you awful</i>				5	(<i>all for -- awful</i>)
<i>you are for</i>	3	<i>you're for</i>	2	5	(<i>missing 'all'</i>)
<i>you all for</i>	4	<i>you for</i>	3	7	(<i>missing 'are'</i>)
<i>you are often</i>	3	<i>you're often</i>	3	6	(<i>all for -- often</i>)
<i>Others:</i>	<i>you low for, you are all, you lone for, you'll all for, your often for, your offer for, you'll off for, you love all, your often, you are free, you are off, you of course, you are out for, you are off for, you, love for, you, you offer</i>				

Comment: When students do not catch the meaning, they tend to hear all kinds of nonsensical string of words, it seems.

22. I'm always **satisfied with** the very best.

<i>Correct</i>	56	(+ spelling mistake	2)	58	
<i>NR</i>				0	
<i>satisfied</i>	16	<i>satisfy</i>	3	19	(<i>missed "with"</i>)
<i>satisfy with</i>				5	(<i>heard the word as is, without meaning</i>)
<i>Others</i>	<i>satisfai, sutisfy, surcrisfy, satisfite, syrtisfyed with, satisfies</i>				

Comment: Two students spelled "*saticefied*". Twelve students wrote "*satisfy*" and connected forms. Teachers had better give a short lesson on "*be xx-ed with*" for such phrases such as "*pleased with*", "*terrified with*", "*disgusted with*", referring to the attitude of the speaker. To a Japanese speaker, the use of passive forms referring to a state of mind sounds somewhat strange, as people tend to say "*yorokobu*" (=pleased with), or "*kirai*" (=disgusted with). These sentiments, in a typical Japanese way of thinking, come of themselves, rather than are caused by an agent. There is a deep difference in the 'verbs of communication' between English and Japanese, but this needs to be dealt with in a separate paper.

23. I've **heard of** her.

Correct					33	
NR					18	
<i>heard ever</i>	8	<i>heard her ever</i>	4	<i>hard ever</i>	2	13 (<i>of her -- ever</i>)
<i>heard about her</i>	7	<i>heard about</i>	2			9 (<i>of -- about</i>)
<i>heard her</i>	3	<i>heard</i>	2	<i>hear her</i>	2	7 (<i>partial listening</i>)
<i>a universe</i>	2	<i>been universe</i>	2	<i>universal</i>	1	5 (<i>of her - universe</i>)
Others		<i>heart des bar, heard to her, good. heard her before, behave her, reminded her, learnd of her, her, believed in her, berived in her, remembered, astonished</i>				

Comment: Thirteen students out of eighty heard the word "ever" instead of "of her". If we include the number of students who heard "universe" instead of "of her", the number comes to 18. Two things are clear from here. First of all, the reduction of "of" to [v] plus the disappearance of [h] must be taught explicitly to the students. There is also the fact that students have a better knowledge of "hear about" rather than "hear of". The difference between these two could well be mentioned in class, with reference also to their meaning and pronunciation.

24. She won the Nobel Prize twice, **once for** physics and once for chemistry.

Correct	75
NR	0
Others	<i>ones for, once for the, one for, the once for, ones</i>

25. He was **great in it**.

Correct	47
NR	0
<i>great</i>	14
<i>great man</i>	9
<i>great ned</i>	8
Others	<i>great nen, great met</i>

Comment: Altogether 33 students missed the word "in", and 19 of them heard something different from 'it'. The 8 students who wrote "great ned" heard the phrase correctly as far as the sounds were concerned. The tape did sound like "great ned". This is the kind of phrase that needs to be heard over and over again for the novice to start hearing it as a meaningful chunk of words.

26. Then **her son** became prime minister after that.

Correct						56		
NR						2		
<i>her sun</i>	6	<i>have sun</i>	1			7 (<i>son -- sun</i>)		
<i>her some</i>	2	<i>her sum</i>	1	<i>some</i>	4	<i>of some</i>	1	8 (<i>son --sum</i>)
<i>his son</i>	2	<i>the son</i>	1	<i>their son</i>	1			4 (<i>missed "her"</i>)
Others		<i>her, south, they had</i>						

Comment: There are two ways to make a mistake with the word "son": one with the vowel, or the word final [m] instead of [n]. The latter mistake is particularly common after a [b] like the above case. The tape actually says [ʃenarsambikeim], and only the correct understanding of the sentence meaning results in the correct spelling.

27. Eventually he **had to resign** in 1974.

Correct	10
NR	1
had resigned	48
had resign	8
had desire, had desired	5
had resire, resired	6
had designed	2
had	2
Others	had been resined, had siier, had withisve, had e..., had to resined, had to resist, is resined, had reser

Comment: This is clearly a matter of 'what to expect' rather than what they heard. Possibly, the phrase "had to resign" was not in the students' vocabulary. The voice in the tape was clear and straightforward. The mixing of [r] with [d] is interesting, since the Japanese flap [r] sounds very much like a [d]. It might be instructive to call attention to the similarity and difference of these two sounds.

28. Have you heard **that one**?

Correct	71
NR	0
the one	7
their one	3
Others	them once, one, their one

29. He **died in a** car crash.

Correct	41
NR	0
died in	25
died	9
died in the	5
Others:	died and, died on, dided in, died out., died a, died at

Comment: This is a classic example of omitting an "a".

30. She graduated with **high honors**.

Correct	21
NR	1
high owners	14
high honers	10

<i>high</i>	5
<i>high orners</i>	3
<i>Others</i>	<i>high anners, high orders, high honners, high ouners, hight orners, high arners, high aunors, high honer, high owners, high annors, high noers, hienas, high arnars, high arners, high noners, high onners, high auners, high hornors, high owener, highornders, high honours, hoest, high noners, high orner, high arnerse</i>

Comment: This is a case similar to question 21 where students came up with all sorts of nonsense. This is another example that shows that unless students know what to expect, they do not catch the meaning. They may know the word "honor", but knowing the collocation "graduating with high honors" is a completely different matter.

31. She **must have been** very intelligent.

<i>Correct</i>	60
<i>NR</i>	2
<i>must been</i>	11
<i>must be</i>	4
<i>Others</i>	<i>must have in, must not be, must</i>

32. It looks **really old**.

<i>Correct</i>	77
<i>NR</i>	1
<i>Others</i>	<i>very old, really well</i>

33. **It's a shame**.

<i>Correct</i>	68
<i>NR</i>	0
<i>It's shame</i>	4
<i>Others</i>	<i>It's shane, It's shein, It's ashamed, It's a shane, It's a shave, It's a sham, It's sure, It's a sham</i>

34. The phonograph was one of the things that Thomas **Edison invented**.

<i>Correct</i>	52
<i>NR</i>	10
<i>(Edison) had invented</i>	3
<i>invented</i>	3
<i>Others</i>	<i>Edison invents, Edison's, Ediosn in vanted, Egison had invited, add, inventent, ever, Edison advanted, Edison envented, Edison even in it, Edison eddise in ivent, Edison revented</i>

35. Kennedy **was assassinated** when he was only 46.

<i>Correct</i>	24
<i>NR</i>	6
<i>was</i>	9
<i>was assassined</i>	6
<i>Others</i>	<i>with sasnated, was sath need, was issassinated, was susnated, with, associated, was sausunly, was assasinented, is assassinated, was assosined,</i>

waqs in southeast, assassinated, with sus, was asassed in, was sinted, was in success, was fasinated, was fasinated, was in success, was assassinated, was susnated, with it sursnade, was ... ed, was insused, was sursnating, was surcenated, was assasingned, is assassined, was asasined, was sersoonated, his succeed, had an accident, was satis, with sudden death, was susderd in

Comment: Just as with questions 21 and 30 where the words were rather difficult, students come up with 'noisiness' in trying to answer this item. There are a certain number of students who insert an "r" in dictation where there should not be any, as can be seen above, e.g., "*surcenated*" "*sersoonated*" instead of "*assassinated*". This is a phenomenon repeatedly appearing in many students' answers. Perhaps we could pinpoint the students who do this by using this kind of dictation diagnostically.

36. You know the famous English **playwright** - Shakespeare.

Correct						7
NR						6
<i>play writer</i>	22	<i>playwriter</i>	11	<i>play-writer</i>	4	37
<i>playwrite</i>	11	<i>play write</i>	8	<i>play-write</i>	1	20
<i>pen write</i>	4	<i>pen right</i>	1			5
<i>playright</i>	1	<i>play right</i>	1	<i>play wright</i>	1	3
<i>play writing</i>						2
Others	<i>play writte, play lights, praywriter, penwriter, played out, pale white, pay writer, Actor</i>					

Comment: This was by far the most difficult, not in terms of listening, but spelling. Sixty-four students heard it correctly as [pleirait], it seems. However, those who did not know the word "*playwright*" had second thoughts. Thirty-seven students thought "This couldn't be '*playwrite*'. There is no such word. So it must have been be '*playwriter*'". On the other hand, twenty students decided to stick to what they heard; "*playwrite*" and its variations.. This is a classic example of hyper correction. Because of the word "*Shakespeare*", there were very few cases of mixing "l" and "r".

37. You know, **I'm in an** embarrassing situation.

Correct					42
NR					1
<i>I'm in</i>	12	<i>I am in</i>	2		14
<i>I'm in a</i>	9	<i>I am in a</i>	3		12
<i>I mean</i>					5
Others	<i>I've been in, I'm in the, I'm on a, I'm now in, I was in, I'm now, I'm an,</i>				

38. **I would if** I were you.

Correct	51
NR	2

Would	9
would do	4
would do if	3
will if	3
would be	2
Others	<i>will, wanted to, wouldn't if, most of, wish</i>

Comment: This is the same type of difficulty as with question 9 where the sentence ended with "let them", which the students are not used to. With question 38, 7 students deliberately added "do" in order to satisfy their preconceived idea about "I would do". This is another demonstration that listening is in fact a process of matching known personal vocabulary and corresponding sound.

39. I'm too embarrassed to **remind her**.

Correct	42
NR	2
mind her	32
Others	<i>mind heard, mind heart, remain her, say to her</i>

40. Make **sure you don't** lend her anything.

Correct	63
NR	0
show you	8
sure	6
Others	<i>you should, she you, sure for you</i>

41. This **guy at work** is always inviting me out.

Correct				63		
NR				0		
guy work(s)	12	guy worked	1	guy worker	1	14
guy						10
guy walk	6	guy walker(s)	3	guy walking	3	12
guy's work						3
guide worker						3
guide walk						3
Others						<i>guide book, at, sky walker, any at work</i>

Comment: Only 15 students mixed "work" with "walk". If there had not been previous instruction, there may have been more of such cases. The word "at" is difficult to hear after the [j] of "guy". As many as 43 missed the word "at". This was a phonologically difficult item, and at the same time it must have been a chunk or words seldom heard by the students.

42. He'll get the message **eventually**.

Correct	66
NR	3

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eventually

5

Others

of every, aventurly, revenge for him, inventuarry, inventurely, eventually.

43. I thought **for sure** they'd ask me to pay for it.

Correct

61

NR

5

sure

5

Others

sure of, ask him, for show, perhaps, persue, of sure. I should, persure, perhaps,

44. But the clerk was **nice and** said I didn't have to.

Correct

57

NR

4

Nice

12

Others

nice smile, nicen, nice He, nice you, nice I, nice on, nice who

To provide an overview of the results in this section, the table on the following page gives a complete summary of the scores, in terms of correct answers, NR's, incorrect answers, and the combination of NRs with incorrect answers

Table 1
Summary of student responses

No.	Correct	NR	Incorrect	Test Item
1	43	2	35	develop pride in their country
2	76	2	2	make people feel good about themselves
3	75	3	4	I think that's a very positive thing
4	77	0	3	it doesn't help develop
5	54	1	25	It brings in a lot of money.
6	71	5	4	many of them are really very entertaining
7	71	5	4	I can't see anything useful in it .
8	65	6	9	I mean . can you see any point in
9	48	12	20	If anyone is crazy enough to try it. let them .
10	68	0	12	with just a rope tied around their legs
11	53	3	24	especially for people who live alone .
12	16	5	59	It can even lower your blood pressure
13	79	0	1	space exploration is pretty expensive.
14	34	2	44	learn more about the universe we live in.
15	79	0	1	How come?
16	63	2	15	should just live together for a while .
17	69	0	11	I can't wait for the next ones .
18	21	1	58	they encourage an interest in sports.
19	66	0	14	they can raise money for the city.
20	53	0	17	Why do you say that?
21	38	1	41	So you're all for smoking in public?
22	58	1	21	always satisfied with the very best
23	33	18	29	I've heard of her.
24	75	0	5	the Nobel Prize twice. once for physics
25	47	2	22	He was great in it .
26	56	1	23	Then her son became prime minister
27	10	1	69	Eventually he had to resign in 1974.
28	71	0	19	Have you heard that one?

(Table 1 continued)

29	41	0	39	He died in a car crash.
30	21	1	58	She graduated with high honors .
31	61	2	17	She must have been very intelligent.
32	77	1	2	It looks really old .
33	68	0	12	It's a shame .
34	52	10	18	things that Thomas Edison invented
35	24	6	50	Kennedy was assassinated when
36	7	6	67	English playwright . -- Shakespeare
37	42	1	37	You know. I'm in an embarrassing
38	51	2	27	I would if I were you.
39	42	2	36	too embarrassed to remind her .
40	63	0	17	Make sure you don't lend her
41	27	4	49	This guy at work is always inviting me
42	66	3	11	He'll get the message eventually
43	61	5	14	I thought for sure they'd ask me
44	57	4	19	the clerk was nice and said I didn't

DATA ANALYSIS

In the following analysis, I have categorized the test items according to the percentage of correct answers. The items were next grouped together into three sets: easy items, items of medium difficulty, and difficult items. The potential causes of difficulty in each group are then discussed.

Easy items

Some of the items in this group were relatively easy to hear, as the students got more than 80% of them correct. The easy items have been split into groups A and B, with the numbers on the right hand side of the items showing the total of NRs and incorrect answers. In the last column, I have included either some typical mistakes or the most common mistakes with a particular test item, classifying these according to the following code:

NR	no response
rp	mistake due to inappropriate reprocessing after hearing the sounds right
sp	spelling
ph	phonetic mishearing such as between [-m] and [-n] or work-walk
ph/gr	mistakes that are hard to classify between a phonetic mishearing or neglect of grammar, such as 'It's a shame' > 'It's shame' where, one could easily supply the article even if it was not heard if attention were paid to the grammar
vc	a mistake due to not knowing a word even if the sounds were heard correctly e.g. 'raise money' > 'rase money'
ns	nonsensical array of written letters with some minimal resemblance to words

Table 2
Classification and analysis of easy items into sub-groups

Group A		>90% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
2	feel good about themselves	4	NR + solve, both
3	a very positive thing	7	NR + others, e.g. perserble)
4	it doesn't help develop	3	rp (help to develop)
13	exploration is pretty expensive	1	sp (pritty)
15	How come?	1	ph (how can)
24	prize twice, once for physics	5	gr (ones for, once for the)
32	It looks really old.	3	NR + rp (really >very)
Group B		80% - 89% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
6	many of them are	9	gr (many of them > many of that)
7	useful in it	9	ph (NR + in it > any)
8	I mean , can you see	15	ph (NR + I mean > any)
10	a rope tied around their legs	12	vc (tied around > tide around)
19	they can raise money for the city	14	vc (raise > rase, rise, rais)
28	Have you heard that one?	13	ph (that one > the one, their one)
33	It's a shame.	12	ph (shame >shane, shine) ph/gr (It's a shame >It's shame)
42	He'll get the message eventually .	14	NR + sp + ns

This categorization tends to show that students have no problem in identifying common one-word or simple two-word items as long as the immediate phonetic environment does not affect the question item. In Group A, all of the two-word items - '*good about*', '*very positive*', '*How come*' and '*once for*' - have clear-cut word boundaries marked with either a stop or a fricative; each word is thus identifiable as a word. Set phrases like 'I mean' or 'It's a shame' can also be easily identified, once the students have learned the meaning of them. As for the two wrong answers in 32, one of the students wrote 'very old' instead of 'really old'. This shows that the student did interpret the meaning of the message appropriately, and that listening reprocessing then interfered. It is also evidence that students are not just transcribing on the paper what they mechanically hear. Rather, in my view, there is an interim stage of processing the acoustic information into meaningful chunks, during which a different kind of listening error can occur.

It seems that the mistakes in Group A show that the students who made these mistakes are still in the beginning stage of learning to listen to English. In Group B, it seems that the students who made these mistakes have not paid much attention to the meaning of the phrases tested, and that they tend to hear something completely different, e.g. 'in it' > 'any', which is, nevertheless, understandable. In the case of 'raise' in question 19, the students did hear the sounds right, but could not tell the meaning of 'raise money', so they wrote the word as 'rase' 'rise' 'rais' 'raize' or 'lazy'. In Question 28, 'that one' was rather easy since the word-initial [ð] was preceded by a voiced stop [d] and thus no

assimilation took place. Otherwise, this could have been more difficult, as is clear from comparing this with other words starting with [ð] preceded by other sounds.

Items of medium difficulty

The items in the table below have a medium degree of difficulty. There are definite reasons why these items are more difficult than the easy items discussed above. For question 9 ('let them'), the tape sounded as if saying "le? tem", so the students who heard it wrong came up with a combination of a liquid and a stop or a fricative of various sorts, such as 'less than', 'reapton' 'Elipton' 'left off'. The mistakes in this category are mostly of phonetic/grammatical type, such as omitting words that could have been supplied even if they were not heard, e.g. articles, as in 'for a while' vs 'for while'.

Table 3
Classification and analysis of medium items of difficulty into sub-groups

Group C		70% - 79% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
16	live together for a while	17	ph/gr (for a while > for while)
20	Why do you say that?	17	ph/gr (why do you > why you)
22	always satisfied with the best	22	ph/gr (satisfied with > satisfied)
25	He was great in it .	24	ph (great in it > great ned)
26	Then her son became prime minister.	24	ph (son>sun, sum) gr (her>his, their)
31	She must have been very intelligent.	19	ph/gr (must have been > must been)
40	Make sure you don't lend her	17	ph (sure you > show you)
43	I thought for sure they'd ask me	19	ph/gr (for sure > sure, show)
44	the clerk was nice and said I didn't	23	ph/gr (nice and > nice)
Group D		60% - 69% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
5	bring in a lot of money	26	ph/gr (a lot of > a lot)
9	If anybody wants to try it, let them .	32	ph (NR) and various forms
11	people who live alone	27	ph (live alone > live around)
34	Things that Thomas Edison invented	28	ph (NR) and various forms
38	I would if I were you.	27	rp (I would if > I would do, I will if) ph/gr (I would if > I would)
Group E		50% - 59% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
1	pride in their country	37	ph (in their > in the)
29	He died in a car crash.	39	ph/gr (died in a > died in)
37	You know, I'm in an embarrassing...	38	ph/gr (I'm in an > I'm in) ph/gr (I'm in an > I'm in a)
39	too embarrassed to remind her	38	ph (remind her > mind her)

The evidence here seems to show that unless students have a sound knowledge of basic grammar, they cannot hear phrases correctly. That is, grammatical knowledge directly affects listening

comprehension at this level of difficulty. In other words, the students must be hearing the sounds, but they do not have a sufficient grammatical awareness to structure what they hear: the phonetic information simply passes their grammatical knowledge by.

Difficult items

These items have been subdivided into three groups. The most outstanding feature of the nature of the mistakes in the whole of this category is the nature of the reprocessing done by students who heard the sounds almost right, but came up with something different and yet managed to retain some meaning, as can be seen in most of the items listed in the table below.

Table 4
Classification and analysis of difficult items into sub-groups

Group F		40% - 49% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
14	about the universe we live in	46	gr (universe we > universe) rp (universe > university)
21	So you're all for smoking in public?	42	nonsensical combinations rp (you're awful)
Group G		30% - 39% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
35	Kennedy was assassinated when he	56	NR + omitting 'assassinated' rp (Kennedy was assasined)
41	This guy at work is always inviting me	53	ph/gr (guy at work > guy work) ph (work > walk, guide walk) rp (guide work)
Group H		< 29% correct	
item	test item	no. of mistakes	classification of typical mistakes
12	It can even lower your blood pressure.	64	ph (...n lower > know your)
18	Well, they encourage an interest in sports.	59	rp (an interest in > an interesting)
27	Eventually he had to resign in 1974.	70	rp (had to resign > had resigned)
36	English playwright , -- Shakespeare.	73	rp (playwright > play writer)
30	She graduated with high honors .	60	ph/rp (high honors > high owners) vc (nonsensical combinations)

For question 27, 'had to resign' does not correspond to the ordinary way of saying the same thing in Japanese, which is [karewa yamesaserareta (literally 'he was forced to resign') or [karewa jishokusita (literally 'he resigned')]. It is not customary in Japanese to say [karewa yameneba naranakatta] which is the literal translation of the above phrase in English. Thus, although it seems students understand the approximate meaning of the message, they tend to reprocess the message and produce their own sentence, which resulted here in 'He had resigned' for as many as 48 students. A similar type of reprocessing has also occurred with question 36, 'playwright'. Students who did

not know the word 'playwright' were divided in two groups. Thirty-seven students thought "This couldn't be 'playwrite'. There is no such word. So it must have been 'play writer". Twenty students knew that they did not hear 'writer', so they wrote 'playwrite' instead of 'playwright', which is only wrong in terms of spelling.

From these difficult items, we can see that there are problems concerned with lexical phrases such as 'high honors' (question 30). The stumbling block here is that, although students know the word 'honor', they know it only in reference to 'honorable'; 'honors' is however concerned with good scholastic standing, so it is difficult to grasp the meaning. This may explain why students came up with nonsensical spelling which they thought they had heard. Question 35 ('was assassinated') was also a matter of vocabulary. Many students just could not even guess the meaning and came up with nonsense. Those who knew the verb reprocessed it wrongly, as 'assassinated'. All the above occurred in spite of the fact that the students were given the script, listened to the tapes over and over again, and were told that these would be tested. One implication might therefore be that certain minor points have to be either taught or drawn attention to, in order for the knowledge to stay with the students. This then creates a dilemma for the teacher since dwelling on too many minor points will make the class dull and deprive the students of the chance of motivated self-learning.

On the sequence of sounds seems to have presented difficulties for students. In question 12, the nasal ending of 'even' with the difficult lateral [l] made some impression for the students as though the tape said 'even know' instead of 'even lower'. In pronouncing [l] in this environment preceded by an [n], the duration of time in which the tongue touches the palate is much longer than with an [l] in some other environment; as a result, the distinction between the [n] and [l] becomes audible only as a difference between a nasal and an oral sound at the same point of articulation. Thus, as many as 33 students wrote 'know' rather than 'lower'. Question 18, in contrast, was a tough combination since 'an interest' can easily be heard as 'in interest' because vocalic reduction, and 'interest in' can easily be mistaken for 'interesting'. In this case, although students did come up with a close approximation of what seems to be the meaning, they in fact did not understand the message at all when they wrote 'interesting sports' instead of 'encouraging an interest in sports' (28 students).

Similar points can be noted with other questions here. Question 41 ('The guy at work') has a combination of both lexical and phonetic difficulty. The combination of 'at work' is not a day-to-day expression for Japanese first-year students to begin with. At the same time, the combination of the glide [y] and the following [a] in 'guy at' presents another difficulty. Of the wrong answers, no one wrote 'at', and among them 6 students came up with 'guide work', possibly because they felt there must be some kind of a stop there. Again, the mixing of 'work' with 'walk' is a classic problem for Japanese students, and 15 students wrote 'walk' or variations instead of 'work'.

Comparison with high school English teachers' test results

After finishing the analysis above, I had an opportunity to administer the same test to 38 motivated junior and senior high school English teachers who attended the In-service Teacher Development Seminar at the University of Tsukuba Foreign Language Center in July 1998. They were given exactly the same items, but without any previous exposure to the text, so the conditions of the tests were different. However, lack of exposure to the text can be compensated for by the fact that they are English teachers. The test procedures were exactly the same as when the test was given to the students. The results still have to undergo further analysis, but I did complete an initial survey of the results with respect to the following two hypotheses:

1. Difficult items in Group H for the students will also be difficult for teachers.
2. The teachers will do better in obviously grammatical mistakes such as 'for a while' > 'for while' or 'satisfied with' > 'satisfied'.

The preliminary results have shown that the hypotheses were both largely correct. For the first hypothesis, the following results were obtained. Difficult items for students were also difficult for the teachers; however, there was some difference in the degree of difficulty, particularly for question 30 ('high honors'), whose meaning the teachers seemed to know better than the students.

Table 5
Comparison of student and teacher responses with Group H difficult items

item	test item	students' mistakes	%	teachers' mistakes	%
12	It can even lower your blood pressure.	64	80.0%	31	91.6%
18	Well, they encourage an interest in sports.	59	80.7	37	97.4
27	Eventually he had to resign in 1974.	70	87.5	32	84.2
36	English playwright , -- Shakespeare.	73	91.3	34	89.5
30	She graduated with high honors .	60	75.0	21	55.2

Number of students: 80

Number of teachers: 38

Concerning the second hypothesis, the results showed two trends. On the one hand, such phrases as 'must have been', 'why do you' or 'nice and' were a piece of cake for teachers, and all the teachers got the first one right. The phrase 'for a while' also presented little difficulty; the teachers who did not get this item right wrote 'full while', or something similar, rather than 'for while'. It was rather surprising, however, that the phrases like 'satisfied with', 'died in a' or 'I'm in an' should be difficult

for some teachers. It is of no wonder that students have problems with prepositions and articles if the teachers do not pay attention to them. The results are shown in the table on the following page.

The key implication here is that, in terms of listening competence, knowledge of vocabulary and grammar in themselves is not sufficient for arriving at a correct phrase; rather that linguistic knowledge has to be strategically available—in short, to be proactively activated—in order for foreign-language listeners to notice that something is wrong when they hear something grammatically incorrect or lexically inappropriate.

Table 6
Comparison of student and teacher responses to items of potential grammatical transparency

item	test item	students' mistakes	%	teachers' mistakes	%
16	live together for a while	17	21.3%	4	10.5%
20	Why do you say that?	17	21.3	9	23.7
22	always satisfied with the best	22	27.5	13	34.2
29	He died in a car crash.	39	48.8	25	65.8
31	She must have been very intelligent.	19	23.8	0	0
37	You know, I'm in an embarrassing...	38	47.5	20	52.6
44	the clerk was nice and said I didn't	23	28.8	8	21.1

Number of students: 80

Number of teachers: 38

CONCLUSION

Now that the nature of listening mistakes has been described, it is time to refer to the six questions I raised at the beginning of this paper. I will look at each in turn, and discuss whether they were answered or not.

Question 1 Is it the case that they cannot hear particular sounds in particular environments; e.g. reduction of vowel sounds due to lack of stress?

This holds generally true. Students do have difficulty in catching certain sounds in certain environments such as:

- word final [m] > [n], [n] > [m]: 'shame>shane', 'son>sum'
- reduced vowels: [ə] > [i] 'an interest' > 'in interest'
- [l] preceded by [n]: 'it can lower your...' > 'it can know her'

- combination of 'in it' (difficulty hearing [ɪ]): 'great in it' > 'great ned'/'great any'
- [l] and [r]: 'live alone' > 'live around' (also a problem of [ou] > [au])

However, it came as a surprise to me to find that sheer phonetic mistakes are only a fraction of the total mistakes. These mistakes can be repeatedly pointed out for students with examples. The majority of the mistakes had to do with lack of or neglect of grammar; in other words, students do not know what to anticipate or look for in listening to a string of sounds, whereas, presumably, native speakers or advanced learners must be doing automatically.

Question 2 When students do not know a certain word, can they still hear approximately what the word sounds like, or do they associate the sounds to whatever they already know as a meaningful word? Which is more likely and why?

This is also generally the case. Students do come up with nonsense, on the one hand. They also associate an incompletely heard word with a known word. Either case is possible, and it depends on the nature of the difficulty, the existence of a similar sounding word, and the amount of possible meaning that they are able to construct. Thus, in case of the phrase 'universe we live in', many students wrote 'university', perhaps affected by the 'we' that followed. When students have no idea what the sequence of sounds may mean, they do come up with nonsense. There were three cases where many students did not know the word, or more exactly speaking, forgot what they had learned in class. Here are what the students came up with (some mistakes close to correct answers):

- 'Edison invented'

Edison invents, Edison's, Ediosn in vanted, Egison had invited, add, inventent, ever, Edison advanted, Edison envented, Edison even in it, Edison eddisse in ivent, Edison revented

- 'was assassinated'

with sasnated, was sath need, was issassinated, was susnated, with, associated, was sausunly, was assasinented, is assassinated, was assosined, was in southeast, assasinated, with sus, was asassed in, was sinted, was in success, was fasinated, was fasinated, was in success, was assassinated, was susnated, with it sursnade, was ...ed, was insused, was sursnating, was surcenated, was assasingned, is assassinated, was asasined, was sersoonated, his succeed, had an accident, was satis, with sudden death, was susderd in

- 'high honors'

high anners, high orders, high honners, high ouners, hight ornors, high arners, high aunors, high honer, high owners, high annors, high noers, hienas, high arnars, high arners, high noners, high

owners, high owners, high honors, high owner, high orders, high honours, hoest, high noners, high owner, high arnerse

Question 3 To what extent does neglect of grammar, or lack of grammatical knowledge, have to do with listening?

As far as the findings of this survey are concerned, this is by far the greatest factor in the students' mistakes. The majority of the mistakes could have been corrected even without hearing the text again, had the students internalized English grammar concerning articles, adverbs, prepositions and tense. Thus, most of the mistakes are of this kind, i.e. a mixture of phonetic/grammatical factors. Since this whole paper is filled with the examples of this sort, I will cite here only a few:

- Omitting an article: for a while > for while
- Omitting an auxiliary verb: why do you > why you
- Omitting a preposition: satisfied with > satisfied
- Changing tense: Edison invented > Edison invents

Now, these mistakes can be further divided into two kinds: recurrent phrases like 'for a while', 'must have been' or 'why do you', which do not include articles and prepositions, were understood much better by English teachers in contrast to students. However, when it comes to articles and prepositions, the teachers performed just as poorly as the students. Thus, a vicious circle is created where teachers remain unable to teach those elements to future teachers (students).

Question 4 To what extent does some particular knowledge about English or lack of it have to do with listening? That is to say, when the students hear something, does their knowledge about English tell them "I must be hearing something wrong, since this does not exist in English as far as I know"? Is there any interference from their native language, Japanese, but, in this case not from the phonological system, but from the underlying logic of the language?

The mental process as outlined in this research question seems to be quite common. Thus in question 27, 'Eventually he had to resign', only 10 out of 80 students got it right, and as many as 48 students wrote: 'he had resigned', as explained in the data. This must be the case of an interference from the students' native language, Japanese. Another example is question 36, 'playwright', which

the students did not know or had forgotten. In this case, 37 students out of 80 wrote 'play writer' or variations, and 20 students wrote 'play-write' and other variations. Interference from Japanese was also obvious in question 27 'had to resign', as explained earlier.

Question 5 Students will hear better if they are given just one word in a phrase, or one set phrase in the form of a sentence, rather than two or three words in a longer sentence. To what extent does this hold true?

This turns out to be only half-true. It is not only one-word items but also two-word items that are easy enough. Easy set phrases can be heard right. Thus, phrases like 'I mean' or 'It's a shame' did not present any problems. However, there are other conditions which enable the students to hear sounds correctly: the difficulty of the word, its environment and the nature of the sounds. From this perspective, question 3 ('a very positive'), question 4 ('it doesn't help develop'), and question 13 ('pretty expensive') were very easy, but question 19 ('they can raise money') was not very easy. When the word boundary is marked with a [p], students tend to catch the words correctly. A one-word item such as question 12 ('it can lower your blood pressure') was one of the most difficult items because of the environment; i.e. [l] preceded by an [n].

Question 6 Do high school teachers of English hear the same way as students?

As far as this question is concerned, the teachers do behave in approximately the same way, with one strong similarity and one characteristic difference. On the one hand, teachers themselves cannot hear articles, numbers and prepositions. On the other, teachers can hear definitely better when it comes to recurring chunks of words like 'for a while' or 'must have been'; they also have some better knowledge of words like 'high honors'.

In general, the results from the present survey came to me as a surprise. They showed me that listening is not a mechanical process, but a process of matching phonetic input with pre-existing knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and, at times, of L1 reasoning. This has led me to begin to have doubts about having students in class listen to materials which are beyond the level of their grammatical/lexical proficiency. They will never learn about articles, numbers and prepositions only by listening. According to my sample, high school teachers are of limited help in this respect since they are unable to pay attention to these aspects either, given their current listening skills. Thus, students may perform much better if they are first presented with explicit vocabulary practice, as well as grammar awareness-raising exercises for points such as articles, number, and prepositions. At the same time, teachers need to undergo certain remedial training concerning number, articles and prepositions so that they in turn can teach their students with more confidence.

In order to develop students' listening ability, micro-listening as described above should be complemented by macro-listening to daily TV programs, for example. This has the advantage of presenting students with recurring expressions which they can eventually learn just by hearing. These two activities should not be mixed in purpose and in practice, and teachers should constantly advise students that two different kinds of basic practice are necessary in listening.

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