Listening-Centered Method for Non-English Majors in Kyoyo English Classes

Toshihiko Shiotsu

Introduction

Japanese universities and colleges strive to prepare their students for international exchange by introducing up-to-date methods to improve the English communicative proficiency of both English majors and others whose specialties demand it. For most non-English majors, nevertheless, English study still consists mainly of mandatory kyoyo English classes taught through the traditional grammar-translation method (GTM), which, results of this study suggest, furthers neither rudimentary communication nor intellectual growth.\(^1\) The data and argument of this study recommend a listening-centered (LC) class using taped dialogs as one working alternative for teachers and planners of kyoyo English classes who incline towards communicative language teaching but have accepted the mainstream GTM format.

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I am grateful to Dr. William E. Lee for reading and commenting on an earlier draft of this paper and to Professor Motoyoshi Nagata for the help in obtaining the English majors’ data.

\(^1\)Kyoyo here is perhaps best translated as “liberal-arts.”
LC Methodology

The study is based on a one year LC course for three sophomore university kyoyo English classes severally comprising forty to sixty Commerce, Economics and Architecture majors, most of whom had completed freshman kyoyo English. The LC method employed commercially distributed teaching material comprising a tape of eighteen dialogs of about ten minutes length (each divided into halves: part 1 and 2) and an eighteen-chapter text with comprehension, vocabulary and dictation questions. In each unscripted dialog two Americans discussed a person known to one of them, at nearly natural speed, but frequently repeating, paraphrasing, explaining, and clarifying key points to maximize comprehension yet retaining spontaneity.

Each dialog formed the basis for an entire 90-minute weekly class. The students prepared to listen to the tape first by reading a set of comprehension questions focusing their attention on the dialog's main ideas. After the dialog was played once, students volunteered to share their answers and the instructor confirmed or corrected them. To prepare for the replay, the students read a set of questions with a more specific focus. Then the dialog was replayed, the questions answered and discussed as before. Subsequently, the students listened to replays of essential linguistic and cultural points and the instructor's explanations. The dictation and vocabulary exercises provided the students a review of some of the linguistic points. It is important to note that at no time were the students expected to understand every word they heard, but rather to grasp the general ideas and key points. To test student comprehension, the instructor edited portions of the dialogs into thirty-item quizzes, which were administered after every two chapters. Grades were based on these quizzes and the semester-end
written examinations.

Assessment of Student Performance

Instrument

Near the end of the school year, a thirty-item comprehension test was administered to the students and to 71 sophomore English majors of the same university.\(^2\) For each item students heard an edited portion of a spontaneous dialog and chose among three written Japanese words or phrases the one that matched what they heard in English.\(^3\) If they thought none matched, they chose "none of the above." (see Appendix) The study did not predict that the non-English majors' scores would equal the English majors'; rather, the latter represented what optimally suited students could accomplish under optimal circumstances, a realistic criterion against which to measure the non-English majors' actual accomplishment.

Results

As expected, the English majors did better as a group than the non-English majors (see Table 1 and 2). However, when the mean differences among the four major groups are analyzed, only the difference between the English majors and the Architecture majors was statistically significant (see Table 3 and 4).

\(^2\)In their freshman and sophomore years, the English majors had at least fifteen practical or theoretical English classes, while the non-English majors only had three kyoyo English classes. The practical English classes included at least three aural-oral communication classes, none of which employed the LC material described in this paper.

\(^3\)The dialogs for this test were from unused chapters of the material for the LC class, and the quizzes in the LC class had employed the same format.
### Table 1. Listening Comprehension Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Major</th>
<th>Mean:</th>
<th>Std. Dev.:</th>
<th>Variance:</th>
<th>Count:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>18.386</td>
<td>3.119</td>
<td>9.731</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum: 12</td>
<td>Maximum: 23</td>
<td>Range: 11</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>18.371</td>
<td>2.961</td>
<td>8.77</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum: 12</td>
<td>Maximum: 24</td>
<td>Range: 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>17.222</td>
<td>3.225</td>
<td>10.403</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum: 6</td>
<td>Maximum: 23</td>
<td>Range: 17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>19.324</td>
<td>3.371</td>
<td>11.365</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum: 7</td>
<td>Maximum: 26</td>
<td>Range: 19</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-English majors</td>
<td>17.91</td>
<td>3.151</td>
<td>9.931</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum: 6</td>
<td>Maximum: 24</td>
<td>Range: 18</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce and Economics majors combined</td>
<td>18.38</td>
<td>3.031</td>
<td>9.187</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Minimum: 12</td>
<td>Maximum: 24</td>
<td>Range: 12</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2. t-Test Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vs.</th>
<th>t-value</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>mean gap</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Non-English</td>
<td>3.015*</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>1.414</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commerce &amp; Economics</td>
<td>1.836</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0.944</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*significant at .05
Table 3. ANOVA - Scheffe's S Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vs.</th>
<th>Diff.</th>
<th>Crit. diff.</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S = Significantly different at this level.

Table 4. ANOVA - Fisher's Protected LSD Results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vs.</th>
<th>Diff.</th>
<th>Crit. diff.</th>
<th>P-Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Architecture</td>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economics</td>
<td>Commerce</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>English</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

S = Significantly different at this level.

Of course these results do not show that the Commerce and Economics majors scored close to the English majors. In fact, they tell us only that the statistical procedure did not reject the possibility of accidental difference. Nevertheless, the mean differences of one and even two should be encouraging figures. Moreover, it is important not to confuse statistical significance with pedagogical significance.

When we compare the non-English majors to the English majors as individuals, the results are even more encouraging. As illustrated in Figure 1, 35.3% of the non-English majors would fall above the 50th percentile of English majors (67.7% above the 25th percentile!). For Commerce majors, the figure is 45.5% and for Economics majors it is 34.3% (see Figure 2). In other words, of the
non-English majors, only 32.3% lack adequate LC competence to perform as well as the bulk of the English majors. (And in fact 15.5% of the English majors could only equal the lowest quartile of non-English majors.)

Figure 1.
Score Distribution: English Majors vs. Non-English Majors

Figure 2.
Score Distribution: Non-English Majors

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Assessment of Student Attitudes

At the time of the test, students filled out a questionnaire comprising three multiple choice and two optional essay questions in Japanese. The multiple choice questions and their results are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(1) How important is it for you to acquire English communication ability?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Important</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>56.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very important</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not important at all</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(2) Which would you like to acquire through university English courses?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge about English</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>28.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English skills</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>71.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(3) If skills, which of the four skills?*</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reading</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>listening</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>33.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>writing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>speaking</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Some students who chose “knowledge” in question 2 also answered this question.

Obviously what the non-English majors expect from university English classes is much more than general intellectual growth. Almost 90% answered that it was important for them to acquire English communication ability. Over 70% preferred to acquire skill in English rather than knowledge about English, and over 97% chose aural-oral rather than graphic communication skills. They are as interested as English majors in communicative English, or
perhaps even more so, since their interest in English is much more likely for becoming better users of it than teachers or scholars.

In light of these results, thirty-three students offered discouraging but unsurprising responses to the first essay question, "Describe the format of your previous kyoyo English classes." At least one of the two freshman kyoyo English classes for all three major groups had been taught through GTM. Describing their freshman GTM classes, two students added that almost all kyoyo English classes employ the same format. The students' and my observation coincide with the common perception: GTM is the dominant method. Some students volunteered comments about the classes as well; none of these comments was positive. Twenty-two students expressed dissatisfaction because their classes were no better than high school classes, and five complained that the classes did not help them in any way. Other students commented: "the level was below that of the college entrance examination"; "formality only [no content]"; "absolutely useless"; and "attendance was strictly for receiving credits [not for learning]." One of the students who particularly disliked the GTM said, "We shouldn't have to translate even after entering college."

Students also answered the second essay question, "What comments do you have about this class or suggestions for improving it?" Two students said they simply disliked English (or perhaps any foreign language) and never got accustomed to the listening practice. Otherwise, the comments were positive and constructive.\(^4\) Twenty students thought it was a good idea to introduce listening practice. Twelve declared it was better than GTM, even though the survey did not ask for comparisons. Ten

\(^4\)Although calculated flattery must always be taken into account, the students were aware that the instructor would not read their comments until after reporting their grades.
valued the format of the lessons. Eleven liked the novelty. Eight
mentioned improvement of their English ability or confidence in
understanding spoken English. Three said the class was
interesting. Another three said the class was fun. And two even
wished there had been opportunities to practice speaking English.
One student noted that it was “easier to maintain concentration in
listening practice” than in GTM lessons. Another was “happy
because attending English class was not so painful any more.”

Discussion
Rationale for GTM

The students’ unsurprising questionnaire responses and
common experience suggest that many college and university
kyoyo English classes still employ GTM and often bore and agonize
the students and even discourage some potentially successful
language learners. Since the method also seems to go against the
needs of this pragmatic society, why have few educators conceived
of alternatives? Despite student and pedagogical criticisms, it is
possible to infer a rationale for GTM, although a problematic one.
The language education scholar Dianne Larsen-Freeman analyzes
the method as follows:

Earlier in this century, this method was used for the purpose of
helping students read and appreciate foreign language literature. . .  
and it was thought that foreign language learning would help students
grow intellectually; it was recognized that students would probably
never use the target language, but the mental exercise of learning it
would be beneficial anyway. (1986:4)

Since kyoyo English is part of the liberal arts curriculum, many

5There are cases where one student is responsible for two or more
comments in the essay questions.
educators consider intellectual growth and the acquisition of general knowledge about the English language to be sufficient goals (even though students apparently disagree). It is questionable, however, whether even these goals are accomplished.

First, is there any evidence that the best way to demonstrate understanding of a foreign language is by translating it? Even if it is, do the instructors actually train their students in the translation skills they expect them to demonstrate on the final examinations? In fact, students complain about the vast amount of rote memorization of translated text which is virtually necessary to pass. In a typical GTM kyoyo English class, the instructor assigns a portion of the text to be translated in front of the class, and, after the student's translation, reads a model translation, doing little else to raise the students' actual linguistic competence to a level adequate for the quantitative and qualitative demand of the final examination. Students therefore have no choice but to memorize as much of the instructor's model translation as possible. In this process, of course, all sight of the original English text is lost. It is difficult to consider such memorization "intellectual growth" or "general knowledge of English." It is also difficult to blame those students who commented on the questionnaire that kyoyo English would not help them in any way. Even if the material taught were important, the method itself might discourage student from studying English and consequently impair teaching results.

Rationale for LC

Most Japanese educators, however, prefer GTM not for its own strength but because of their abundant objections to communicative classes. They argue that a forty to sixty student kyoyo English class is impractically large for conversation
practice. Rather than learning to exchange a few simple greetings at best, they maintain, students should concentrate on understanding more complex and academic texts which they can all study simultaneously. On the other hand, opponents may also claim that explaining the complexities of an extensive spontaneous dialog is too taxing, time consuming, and unrewarding.

Some of these objections are clearly based on an underestimate of these students' language learning ability due to equating "communication" and "oral production." Though it is difficult to imagine kyoyo English students debating fluently after thirty hours of weekly English, concentrating on listening comprehension can go well beyond simple greetings in the same time span. For example, LC students can quickly grasp the general ideas in dialogs like the following:

B: ... A Navy scholarship? That means the Navy paid for his college?
A: Right. The Navy paid for his college, and then after college he was going to join the Navy and become a pilot.
B: After college he would join the navy and become a pilot. So, what happened?
A: Well, he graduated from college with a bachelor's degree in geology.
B: A bachelor's degree in geology.
A: But he didn't go into the Navy.
B: He didn't? He didn't go to the Navy? Why not?
A: Well, at that time there was the war in Vietnam.
B: Oh, the war in Vietnam. So, he didn't go into the Navy.
A: That's right.
B: Was he afraid?
A: No, no, he wasn't afraid. He thought the war was wrong.
B: So, he didn't want to fight in Vietnam because he thought the war was wrong.
A: That's right.
B: So, if he didn't join the Navy, that must have made his father very upset, didn't it?
A: Well, yeah. Both his parents were very upset, and his father was just furious. . .

For a spoken text of this length, this involves fairly complex
linguistic items and philosophical discussion, and is, by no means, elementary or immature compared to typical GTM reading passages like the following:

Once there were four children whose names were Peter, Susan, Edmund, and Lucy. This story is about something that happened to them when they were sent away from London during the war because of the air-raids. They were sent to the house of an old Professor who lived in the heart of the country, ten miles from the nearest railway station and two miles from the nearest post office. He had no wife and he lived in a very large house with a housekeeper called Mrs. Macready and three servants. He himself was a very old man with shaggy white hair which grew over most of his face as well as on his head, and they liked him almost at once; but on the first evening, when he came out to meet them at the front door, he was so odd-looking that Lucy (who was the youngest) was a little afraid of him, and Edmund (who was the next youngest) wanted to laugh and had to keep on pretending he was blowing his nose to hide it.

Moreover, if we do not limit our conception of “communication” to “face-to-face speech exchange,” (as Japanese educators commonly do, especially in expressions like “communication practice” or “communication ability,”) it will be clear that LC actually offers more practical, efficient use of time in large classes, especially those for non-English majors.\(^6\)

Japanese high school students who do not wish to major in English must nevertheless learn, at least superficially, a considerable number of prescriptive linguistic rules for college entrance examinations. But a very small percentage will ever put their knowledge to any use, and most will waste their tremendous effort by failing to find communicative opportunities and letting their knowledge lapse into oblivion. Furthermore, many such students can best improve their proficient use of these rules by

\(^6\)After all, listeners engage in receptive communication of verbal messages via recordings as do readers with verbal messages in print.
increasing their second-language (L2) processing speed. In their case, attempting to translate passages beyond their level of competence will hinder rather than help their development. In my view the most serious problem facing these non-English majors is the lack of appropriate aural input necessary to develop their interlanguage (i.e., the internalization of a modified version of the L2 which successively approximates actual L2 competence as acquisition continues). (McLaughlin, 1987:59-81 and Ellis, 1990:50-56)

Since students engage in L2 communication whenever they activate their interlanguage to process incoming linguistic data, the strength of the LC method lies in all students' simultaneous engagement in the act of L2 communication, whatever the class size. Since the comprehension questions require students to demonstrate their understanding of the dialog immediately afterwards, they must and will rely on their interlanguage while the dialog is played. While GTM students also may acquire knowledge simultaneously by memorizing an instructor's translation, they will not gain in language proficiency because they are not using their interlanguage. It is the instructor's responsibility to direct the students to an appropriate source of aural language input through which the students can "work" their interlanguage system, rather than allow it to fossilize or

7Again, "use" here refers to receptive use of language, rather than productive use.

8I am not overestimating the effect of what Krashen (1981:100) calls comprehensible input. As more recent works related to this issue suggest, there is a fundamental difference between child first language acquisition and adult L2 acquisition (Bley-Vroman, 1989), and providing comprehensible input itself does not guarantee successful L2 acquisition (Long, 1988). I believe, nevertheless, much more input is necessary for Japanese high school graduates to test and internalize the grammar rules they had learned through classroom instruction.
degenerate.

If the five-minute spontaneous dialog is not too complex for the students' interlanguage, the instructor need not go into extremely detailed explanations of the entire content. To do so, indeed, would be interminable. Nevertheless, extensive, largely comprehensible dialogs are more suitable input for college students than explainable dialogs which are too short, too elementary or too contrived. Extensive, spontaneous dialogs also help students to realize that if they understand a certain number of essential points, they will be able to cope with the linguistic complexity and sophistication of adult dialog. The instructor must accordingly focus on a manageable number of teaching points and encourage students' tolerance of some degree of uncertainty.

Conclusion

Most language educators realize that language classes should not include sixty or even forty students, and universities may begin reducing class size or simply abandon kyoyo English, depending on their managerial options. Therefore, one may view the LC kyoyo English class as an interim solution until smaller classes replace them. Until then, however, the more instructors employ such methods in kyoyo English classes, the better chance that non-English majors will enjoy English, develop motivation, make greater efforts, increase their processing speed, and acquire a more sophisticated interlanguage system and communication skills.
Appendix

Listening Comprehension Test Sample Question

Tapescript

Question number 30.

A: Here's what happened, you see. During the first half of the game, Bubba played in the band.

B: Oh, he played the drum in the band.

A: He played the drum in the band during the first half. He also marched with the band during the halftime show.

B: Oh, I see. Up through the halftime, he was in the band.

A: That's right. Then after the halftime show, Bubba would go into the dressing room. He would change clothes. He would take off his band uniform and put on his football uniform.

B: So, he'd get out of his band uniform, and put on his helmet.

A: That's right, his pads, all of his protectors, right.

B: And he'd go out and play football.

A: And, usually...

Answer choices

Question number 30.

1) "kigae" (clothe-changing)  2. "beruto" (belt)  3. "mainichi no koto" (everyday thing)  4. "gaito nashi" (none of the above)

References


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