

**Listening Comprehension Through
Culturally Familiar Contexts:
A Case Study in Japan**

Gordon Carson

Faculty of Media and Arts, Otemae University
Nishinomiya-shi, Hyogo 662-8552 Japan
Email: gordy@otemae.ac.jp

Abstract

Around the world, English language educators are increasingly turning to localized and culturally-oriented learning materials to adapt to the needs of their learners. Along with this trend, a small but growing number of studies support the notion that culturally familiar contexts in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning have positive outcomes for language acquisition. However, scant research has been conducted on non-linguistic variables such as doubt and perceived difficulty in comprehending culturally non-familiar listening components. Therefore, this study investigates the effect that cultural familiarity can have on lowering barriers to listening comprehension for English language learners. To achieve this purpose, a series of preliminary and secondary tests were administered on intermediate-level learners at a Japanese university. Through a crossover analysis, two groups were presented near identical listening passages that reflected either a Japanese or foreign context. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests gauged the effectiveness of recall of vocabulary, grammar, and context comprehension between a sequence of pre- and

post-tests. Paired sample *t*-tests measured students' perceived difficulty between the tests. The results suggest that active filters and perceived barriers are significantly higher for those presented with culturally non-familiar passages. However, such inhibitions can be diminished after instruction, resulting in near equal gains to those who receive culturally familiar listening passages.

Key Words: listening comprehension, culturally-familiar materials, culturally non-familiar

Introduction

The way we communicate and interact with others is primarily shaped by whom we listen to and what we hear. Veritably, listening comprehension is one of the most crucial components of acquiring proficiency in a new language, yet it is often treated as a passive and receptive skill that is neglected or skimmed over by educators. However, listening is an active and productive process (Schmitt 2002) where learners must simultaneously store information in their short-term memories, make sense of it, and respond appropriately. It is a complex process that sometimes leads to communication breakdowns and discouragement. When comprehension fails, affective filters and barriers go up, making learners less inclined to seek and respond to the input that they receive (Krashen, 1982, 2009). In contrast, comprehensible input can lower filters which enables a rise in incentive for learners to seek and make meaning out of information, and the acquisition of new knowledge is best when it is relevant to the acquirer who is then motivated and free from anxiety (Krashen, 2009; Sharif, 2012). Therefore, any approach that can help learners to reduce barriers, ease apprehension, and provide comprehensible input is worth exploring.

A key component that can raise or lower barriers towards listening materials lays within the content in which they are presented. For instance, if the content is heavily laden with foreign substances, comprehension, then interest can fall (Farangi &

Saadi, 2017). Conversely, localized matter that presents culture in which learners can quickly identify and relate to materials can encourage more learner participation which results in more learning (Dar, 2012; Bal & Kozleski, 2012; Mahardika, 2018). This can be done by providing them with culturally-familiar components so that they can utilize prior knowledge and expectations to create meaning. Familiarization with terms related to names, places, and customs can contribute to activating schema (Alptekin, 1981), which can be processed without having to deal with unknown terms. If listening materials are presented in a foreign context, however, learners might need to be provided with background and systemic knowledge of foreign substances so that they can be familiarized with unknown matter before listening. Regrettably, mainstream language texts rarely implement such support into their materials.

The assertion that culturally familiar materials enhance learning outcomes does not contend that culturally non-familiar, authentic materials are detrimental or disadvantageous. On the contrary, empirical studies (e.g., Bacon & Finnemann, 1990; Thanajaro, 2000; Kilickaya, 2004) have shown that presenting learners with authentic materials can simulate real communicative situations that give rise to motivation and positive outcomes. However, materials from English-speaking countries do not necessarily reflect the learning styles or cultural values of the students who use them, often resulting in a decline in motivation and a reluctance to participate and interact (Le & Nguyen, 2005). In such circumstances, learning can become a mundane, meaningless activity that leads to demotivation and dropout. According to other research (e.g., Kim, 2000; Kilickaya, 2004; Zhafarghandi, Barekat & Homaei, 2014), authentic materials can particularly cause frustration and demotivation among lower-level learners due to a lack of lexical and structural understandings of the target language. On the contrary, localized materials can help increase students' knowledge of vocabulary, improve cultural understanding, and boost listening comprehension and language proficiency (Zhafarghandi, Barekat & Homaei, 2014). It is a

process in which language knowledge and world knowledge interact (Zeng, 2007) and help reduce the processing load that can inhibit listening comprehension.

Background: Theoretical Perspective

Language educators throughout the world are giving increasing attention to the incorporation of local cultural identity in their curricula (e.g., Reimann, 2009; Kinginger, 2015; Kaili, 2016; Simsek, 2017; Sheridan, Tanaka, & Hogg, 2017). Moreover, an increasing number of studies have advocated the use of cultural schema in English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL) learning contexts (e.g., Dinh & Sharifaian, 2017; Farangi & Saadi, 2017; Kristiawan, 2017). Due to globalization and the number of non-native English speakers outnumbering native English speakers, fewer learners have the objective to use English outside of their own cultural context. A multitude of mainstream textbooks designed for a global market contains foreign cultural contexts which add barriers to understanding and comprehension. For this reason, greater attention is being given to the study of culturally neutral and culturally familiar listening materials in recent years.

Bakhtiarvand and Adinevand (2011) investigated the effect of cultural knowledge on improving Iranian EFL learners' listening comprehension. From a sample of 300 participants, 120 pre-intermediate language learners were selected and randomly assigned to four groups. Throughout 16 weeks, each group was exposed to the following conditions: Target Culture (TC), International Target Culture (ITC), Source Culture (SC), and Culture Free (CF). Pre-tests and post-tests consisting of 25 listening comprehension questions were administered with a null hypothesis that none of the conditions would have any significant influence on listening comprehension. Results processed through one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) and post-hoc tests revealed that the TC, ITC, and SC groups had statistically significant gains while the CF participants had no significant gains. The outcome

suggests that greater familiarity with specific culturally-oriented listening material enhances EFL learners' listening proficiency.

Another study by Kobeleva (2012) examined whether unfamiliar proper names affected ESL learners' listening comprehension. Comprehension of a one-minute news report was tested on 110 intermediate to advanced-level ESL learners under two conditions. One report had proper names that were taught in advance (Names Known) and the other had proper names that were unfamiliar before listening (Names Unknown). Using independent samples t-tests and ANCOVA analysis of covariance, the group with known proper names demonstrated significantly better results on true-false-don't know statements and open-ended questions than the other group. Moreover, the Names Known participants rated all comprehension tasks as easier to do and expressed higher comprehension success than their counterparts.

Zhafarghandi, Barekat and Homaei (2014) conducted a study that dealt with attitudes of teachers and learners toward authentic listening samples that were deemed appropriate for cultural contexts and the social conditions of the learners. Participants consisted of 60 pre-intermediate learners and 30 teachers who were randomly selected and assigned to two groups. One group received listening materials taken from UK radio programs, whereas the other group received authentic listening components with more localized content but spoken by native English speakers. Participants were asked to study and agree or disagree with 35 statements followed by interviews to record extra qualitative data. Mean and standard deviation percentages indicated that both learners and teachers had statistically significant preferences for culturally appropriate authentic listening materials. Qualitative results revealed that learners felt that such materials improved their listening comprehension, fulfilled their needs, were interesting, enabled them to write more, and increased their knowledge of vocabulary for real situations.

Sheridan, Tanaka and Hogg (2017) conducted a crossover study to compare vocabulary retention, content comprehension,

and learner response by giving assignments in both culturally familiar and foreign contexts. Two groups from a pool of 41 high-intermediate Japanese university students were assigned two sets of paired reading passages chosen from either culturally familiar or altered contexts to reflect culturally familiar or unfamiliar settings. Both sets of readings were identical with the exception that all proper nouns were placed in either Japanese or foreign contexts. Results of pre- and post-tests were analyzed through repeated measure *t*-tests, which displayed significant vocabulary recall for learners with culturally-familiar contexts in three out of four tests. Qualitative data obtained from homework answers and class discussions provided evidence that students were more engaged with articles that had a familiar cultural base. A further outcome of the study was that in the absence of culturally-based, familiar contexts, learners seemed to approach assignments with cultural biases which influenced their attitudes and responses toward the work.

Drawing from previous studies, the analysis in this paper mirrors some of the research above for listening comprehension in a Japanese cultural setting. It investigates the effects of familiar and unfamiliar cultural contexts with the hypothesis that affective filters can be lowered and anxiety reduced through the use of nativized listening materials. Like Bakhtiarvand and Adinevand (2011), pre and post-tests were administered to compare gains and attitudes towards differing cultural content. In congruence with the reading materials developed by Sheridan, Tanaka and Hogg (2017), identical listening passages were prepared with all proper nouns being replaced to fit either foreign or Japanese contexts. The main difference between this study and the others, however, is that all other studies gave a period of treatment within either native or foreign cultural contexts between pre and post-tests. They hypothesized that groups treated with nativized content would produce higher language comprehension, recall, and interest. This crossover experiment, however, gave all groups the same treatment in a context that did not focus on any specific

culture. This presents a new angle that previously remained unaddressed, particularly among Japanese learners.

In sum, existing literature provides firm evidence that learners presented with culturally familiar materials can produce positive results. Moreover, it demonstrates that background knowledge and recognizable topics can utilize prior knowledge that can enhance language comprehension. The pedagogical implications open a way for educators and curriculum developers to incorporate materials in which learners are culturally connected. However, past studies have not examined in depth how students respond to culturally familiar and non-familiar listening materials after receiving instruction in nearly identical situations. How do learners react to culturally familiar listening materials where all groups receive the same materials and instruction? Do active filters within students differ when presented with culturally familiar or non-familiar materials?

Preliminary Research Hypotheses

A preliminary study was conducted to cast light on the following null hypotheses:

H01 – Materials with the target language loaded with Japanese proper nouns, but with treatment in a culturally neutral context, do not have any significant influence on the listening comprehension of EFL learners.

H02 – Materials with the target language loaded with foreign proper nouns, but with treatment in a culturally neutral context, do not have any significant influence on the listening comprehension of EFL learners.

Methodology

The process began with a large preliminary study followed by a smaller comprehensive analysis. The preliminary study comprised of first-year university students enrolled in a core curriculum English course. Using the standardized TOEIC Bridge test, 668 learners were placed into three levels: beginner, lower-

intermediate, and upper-intermediate. Students with scores below 100 out of a possible 180 were put into 15 beginner classes. Those who scored between 100 and 119 were placed in seven lower-intermediate classes, and students above 120 were placed into six upper-intermediate classes. The upper-intermediate students became the target group of this study as they were most likely to understand the testing process and comprehend the test questions. The student sample comprised of 138 upper-intermediate students (52 males and 86 females) with average placement scores clustered around a mean of 124. All classes met 90 minutes a week and used the same textbook and materials taught by three different instructors. Most participants had a minimum of six years of English instruction before the start of the course. The subjects' ages were 17 ($n=1$), 18 ($n=90$), 19 ($n=68$), 20 ($n=35$), 21 ($n=8$), 22 ($n=2$), 27 ($n=1$), 28 ($n=1$).

Two groups were formed of three classes each for an initial comparative crossover study. Throughout six lessons, teachers gave participants two sets of activities. Each set was made up of four components: a 20-question listening pre-test, a review assignment, a mid-treatment listening cloze test, and a 20-question post-test. Listening passages for the pre-tests, listening clozes, and post-tests were composed and recorded by using target vocabulary and grammar points from two units selected from the course textbook. Table 1 illustrates the process assigning listening materials to each class over two sets of tests.

Table 1: *The Process*

First Set	Class 1 – (Movies) Japanese cultural context	Class 2 – (Movies) American cultural context
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-test - 20 questions • Culturally neutral instruction • Supplementary homework with the target language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-test - 20 questions • Culturally neutral instruction • Supplementary homework with the target language
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening Cloze test fresh after culturally neutral instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening Cloze test fresh after culturally neutral instruction
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-test - 20 questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-test - 20 questions

Second Set	Class 1 – Arranged Marriage Indo-Canadian context	Class 2 – Arranged Marriage Japanese cultural context
Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-test - 20 questions • Supplementary homework with the target language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pre-test - 20 questions • Supplementary homework with the target language
Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening Cloze test fresh after culturally neutral instruction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening Cloze test fresh after culturally neutral instruction
Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-test - 20 questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Post-test - 20 questions

A 20-question pre-test was given in the first week with a topic that centered around movies. The test consisted of ten questions on vocabulary, four on grammar structures, and six on comprehension. One group listened to several statements and one exchange between two people in a culturally familiar Japanese version relating to famous Japanese places, films, authors, and celebrities. The other class listened to passages that were identical, apart from all proper nouns being altered to reflect a foreign context with lesser or unknown places, films, authors, and celebrities.

Since phonetic implementation rules and forms of lexicon differ between regions and international lines, it was imperative to make the listening tracks as phonetically neutral as possible. Due to limited accessibility to varied authentic accents from around the world, native American and Canadian speakers recorded all listening tracks. By creating subcultural contexts such as Indo-Canadian (rather than Indian), however, non-familiar cultural aspects could be implemented while using neutralized or reduced accents to which most Japanese learners are already accustomed. Contrary to idealizing North American accents and intonation, a conscious effort was made to reduce speed and speak in a clear, understandable manner so that listeners could connect to the characters that represented familiar and unfamiliar geographic regions and subcultures.

Surveys at the end of each test gauged the students' perceived difficulty of listening on a six-point Likert scale. After the pre-test, a culturally neutral lesson on a unit and target

language was commenced. After class, each group was issued near-identical reading assignments about meeting celebrities that reviewed the target vocabulary in either a Japanese or foreign context. Table 2 below illustrates examples of the questions on the pre- and post-tests.

Table 2: *Pre and Post-test Examples*

Cultural Familiar Context (20 questions) Japanese	Foreign Context (20 Questions) Indo-Canadian
<p>Vocabulary (10)</p> <p>“Tokyo Sky Tree is a remarkable building. Did you know that it has its own train station and is 634 meters tall? It is very _____!”</p> <p>a. impressive b. standard c. cultured d. outgoing</p>	<p>Vocabulary (10)</p> <p>“The Saint-Sulpice Seminary is a remarkable building. Did you know that it has the country’s oldest clock and is 333 years old? It is very _____!”</p> <p>a. impressive b. standard c. cultured d. outgoing</p>
<p>Grammar (4)</p> <p>Kenta loves animation movies _____ are made in Japan.</p> <p>a. that b. which c. what d. both a and b</p>	<p>Grammar (4)</p> <p>Taniska loves Bollywood movies _____ are made in India.</p> <p>a. that b. which c. what d. both a and b</p>
<p>Comprehension (6)</p> <p>True or False questions based on verbal exchanges in Japanese context</p>	<p>Comprehension (6)</p> <p>True or False questions based on verbal exchanges in non-Japanese context</p>

From the start, it was imperative that the listening passages were aligned to the level of the classes. In congruence to methods used by Sheridan, Tanaka and Hogg (2017), a computer program called VocabProfile (Cobb, 2017) was used to identify the percentage of high-frequency English words within the listening passages based on the New General Service List Test (Stoeckel & Bennett, 2015). First, passages run from the course textbook revealed that slightly over 80% of the lexicon came from the first set of 1,000 high-frequency English words, with almost 20% coming from the second set of frequency bands with a small percentage of off words. Based on this analysis, listening passages for the pre- and post-tests were created to include roughly 80% of

the words coming from the first thousand-word band and the rest comprised of off words (Japanese or foreign proper nouns) or target vocabulary which come from the second thousand-word band of words which students were unlikely to know. No vocabulary came from the third or fourth bands of most commonly used words. Table 3 displays the breakdown of the lexical items on the listening passages.

Table 3: *Breakdown of the Lexical Items in the Listening Passages*

Frequency Levels	Pre and Post-test 1 (Movies)	Pre and Post-test 2 (Arranged Marriage)	Word examples from the tests
First 1,000 words	81.25%	82.30%	
Second 1,000 words	6.25%	5.75%	adventurous, overcome, disappointing, introverted
Third 1,000 words	0%	0%	none
Fourth 1,000 words	0%	0%	none
Off Words	11.36%	9.73	(Japanese or foreign proper nouns)

Instruction was completed in the second week, immediately followed by a listening cloze activity for review of the target vocabulary. Students were asked to fill in blanks with the words that they perceived to hear on a printed version of a dialogue that they listened to about movies versus books. Dialogues for each group were identical except for that one was in a Japanese context and the other in an American setting. Only the proper nouns differed. After the class, no assignments were given for summation and review so that learners had a chance to either retain or forget the target language naturally before the post-test.

At the start of the third class, students were given a listening post-test identical to the pre-test. One group listened to several statements and exchanges between two people in a

Japanese setting, and the other group listened to the same statements and dialogue with all proper nouns in a foreign context. None of the proper nouns in the tests were presented during treatment. Surveys based on a six-point Likert scale were conducted at the end of the tests to gauge the students' perceived difficulty of listening as well as their interest levels in the topics.

Preliminary Test Results

Classes with culturally familiar passages had only slightly higher gains on the exploratory post-tests than their counterparts. This seemed to confirm the null hypotheses which contended that gains would not be significant if treatment between pre and post-tests had culturally neutral treatments. However, there were some inconsistencies. Some students claimed a lack of clarity for directions and a small number of mark sheets were returned incomplete. Therefore, the vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension components could not merit a reliable statistical analysis. Thus, the process needed to be redone and repeated with a new sample population. The results of a second analysis are reported in detail later.

The surveys at the end of the tests to measure perceived difficulty revealed no complications or inconsistencies. Paired-samples *t*-tests with *p* values threshold of less than 0.05 showed that there was statistical significance between groups relating to the level of perceived difficulty between the pre- and post-tests. The independent variable, the cultural context of the article, had two levels: Japanese and foreign. The dependent variable was the students' self-reported score of perceived difficulty on a Likert scale from 1 to 6, with increasing scores indicating greater difficulty. Those with culturally familiar Japanese content had no significant difference in perceived difficulty for the pre-test ($M = 2.963$, $SD = 0.072$) and the post-test ($M = 3.410$, $SD = 0.482$) conditions; $t(2) = -1.497$, $p = 0.273$. However, students with non-culturally familiar content displayed significant difference in their scores for the pre-test ($M = 2.33$, $SD = 0.731$) and the post-test ($M = 3.867$, $SD = 0.603$) conditions; $t(2) = -8.492$, $p = 0.014$. Post-test

data for both conditions demonstrated no significant difference in the Japanese post-test score ($M = 3.410$, $SD = 0.482$) and the foreign post-test score ($M = 3.867$, $SD = 0.603$) conditions; $t(2) = 1.860$, $p = 0.204$. The results suggested that listening content loaded with non-culturally familiar proper nouns on the pre-test created an initially perceived barrier that was lowered or essentially erased after treatment.

In summary, the preliminary experiment contained some inconsistencies that needed to be addressed. One was that the tests themselves required some minor improvements and alterations so that students could clearly comprehend and follow instructions. The most notable problem, however, was in the difference of gains between the six classes. Although all classes scored evenly with an average of eight points out of twenty on the pre-tests, there was a major discrepancy between post-test scores, depending on who taught the classes. One instructor's classes had consistent gains of 4.24 and 4.33 points. Another teacher's classes had gains of 3.56 and 1.07, and a third instructor's classes gained 1.42 and 0.9 points. These scores suggested a disparity between teaching styles and class objectives. Therefore, a more compact and improved new study was merited with two new research questions that emerged from the preliminary analysis.

Secondary Analysis Research Questions

The preliminary study with null hypotheses was followed by a smaller comprehensive analysis which addressed the following questions:

1. Will students with culturally familiar listening passages show better gains than those with non-cultural familiar passages?
2. Do students have an initially perceived barrier when listening to conversations weighted with foreign proper nouns?

A second study commenced with an improved version of the tests and listening content on a smaller, new group of participants. The second group consisted of a fresh group of 52

first-year university students (23 males and 29 females) divided into two classes and taught by one instructor. The subjects' ages were 18 ($n=43$), 19 ($n=3$), 23 ($n=2$), 44 ($n=1$). Like the first test, participants came from a new upper-intermediate class that clustered around an average medium score of 123 on the TOEIC Bridge test. Students received the same instruction as the subjects in the preliminary study. Both classes met for 90 minutes a week and used the same textbook and materials for a core curriculum course.

Again, there were two sets of tests for a new crossover study using the same process as the first. One group received listening components about movies in a Japanese context and the other an American setting. Five months after the first set of tests, the same procedure was flipped and repeated. The group that first received listening segments in a Japanese context were given a new Indo-Canadian situation about arranged marriage. Those who first received the American materials were given new listening passages in a Japanese context about arranged marriage. The second procedure was identical to the first with a 20-question listening pre-test, a review assignment, a mid-treatment listening cloze test, and a 20-question post-test. Again, none of the proper nouns in the tests were presented during treatment.

Second Test Results

The first set of listening tests had Japanese and American settings relating to movies. To determine the relationship between the cultural familiarity of listening settings and vocabulary acquisition and grammar, a one-way analysis of variance test (ANOVA) was conducted. Students who did not complete mark sheets for either the pre- or post-test were not factored into the data, bringing the total N number to 45. The independent variable was the cultural context of the listening. The dependent variable was the gains from vocabulary and grammar pre-tests to post-test. The group that listened to the culturally familiar Japanese listening ($n = 22$) achieved greater mean vocabulary test gains

from the pre-test to post-test; however, the ANOVA results discovered no significant relationships, $F(1, 39) = .291, p = .592$.

To examine the relationship between listening setting on comprehension, a one-way ANOVA was conducted for the comprehension section, with the independent variable being the cultural context of the listening. The dependent variable was the scores on the comprehension tests. The group that listened to the culturally familiar Japanese listening had higher mean scores on the comprehension tests; however, the ANOVA results were non-significant, $F(1,43) = .508, p = .480$.

Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine the influence of the cultural context of the listening on students' perceived difficulty. The independent variable, the cultural context of the article, had two levels: Japanese and American. The dependent variable was the self-reported score of perceived difficulty on a Likert scale from 1 to 6, with increasing scores indicating greater interest. There was a significant difference in the scores for the culturally familiar Japanese pre-test content ($M = 4.25, SD = 0.944$) and non-culturally familiar American pretest content ($M = 3.364, SD = 1.478$) conditions; $t(2) = 2.58, p = 0.017$. This suggests that the non-culturally familiar listening passages were perceived to be more difficult to comprehend than culturally familiar ones. Notably, there was no significant difference between the scores for the culturally familiar Japanese post-test content ($M = 3.526, SD = 1.124$) and non-culturally familiar American post-test content ($M = 2.947, SD = 0.705$) conditions; $t(2) = 1.723, p = 0.102$. Such an outcome could suggest that the initial active filters were lowered after instruction for the group with American content on the pre-test.

The second set of listening tests had Japanese and Indo-Canadian settings relating to arranged marriage. Again, to determine the relationship between the cultural familiarity of listening settings and vocabulary acquisition and grammar, a one-way ANOVA was conducted. Students who were absent for either the pre- or post-test as well as those with incomplete answers were not factored into the data bringing the total *N* number to 38.

The independent variable was the cultural context of the listening. The dependent variable was the gains from vocabulary and grammar pre-tests to post-test. The group that listened to the culturally familiar listening achieved greater mean vocabulary test gains from the pre-test to post-test; however, the ANOVA results were non-significant, $F(1, 35) = 1.824, p = .186$.

To examine the relationship of listening setting on comprehension, a one-way ANOVA was conducted for the comprehension section, with the independent variable being the cultural context of the listening. The dependent variable was the scores on the comprehension tests. This time, the group that listened to the culturally familiar listening had slightly lower mean scores ($M = 3.1, SD = 1.119$) on the post-test comprehension tests compared to the non-culturally familiar Indo-Canadian ($M = 3.412, SD = 1.372$); however, the ANOVA results were non-significant, $F(1,35) = .102, p = .376$.

Paired-samples *t*-tests were conducted to determine the influence of the cultural context of the listening passages on students' perceived difficulty. The independent variable, the cultural context of the article, had two levels: Japanese and Indo-Canadian. The dependent variable was the self-reported score of perceived difficulty on a Likert scale from 1 to 6, with increasing scores indicating greater interest. Again, there was a significant difference in the scores for the culturally familiar Japanese pre-test content ($M = 3.75, SD = 1.118$) and non-culturally familiar American pretest content ($M = 2.947, SD = 0.705$) conditions; $t(2) = 2.421, p = 0.026$. This suggests that the non-culturally familiar listening passages were again perceived to be more difficult to comprehend than culturally familiar ones. Notably, there was no significant difference between the scores for the culturally familiar Japanese post-test content ($M = 3.647, SD = 1.367$) and non-culturally familiar American post-test content ($M = 3.143, SD = 0.910$) conditions; $t(2) = 1.225, p = 0.227$. Consistent with the first batch of tests, the data suggests the initial gap between groups was narrowed and that perceived listening barriers were lowered

for those with culturally non-familiar material after culturally neutral treatment.

Limitations

There were some limitations to this study. First, it can be noted that it was conducted within a single cultural context in Japan. Furthermore, the research only applied to upper-intermediate level students without including novice or advanced-level learners. Therefore, further avenues of study could be conducted in other cultural settings and with students at various levels of English proficiency. Second, only ten items were included on the vocabulary test and just four for the grammar component, which was likely too few to precisely compare pre- and post-test gains. For example, one student in Class 2 had perfect scores for vocabulary and grammar questions on the pre-test, thus somewhat limiting the increases for his class. Third, a smaller sample population for the secondary study was not ideal. Although it represented 35% of the total upper-intermediate level students and 7.85% of the entire student body, a higher N number could have provided stronger data. Finally, more time could have been allotted for participants to write comments and provide detailed feedback. Space on the surveys for writing was left mostly blank, making it difficult to add qualitative results. For this reason, all the data above includes only quantitative results.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate the influence of cultural familiarity on English language learners' listening comprehension. Over a series of crossover tests, the participants of this study consistently judged comprehension to be more difficult when unfamiliar proper nouns were present. This is consistent with other research that suggests that when there are more words to be distinguished, comprehension can be disrupted, raising anxiety and active filters (e.g., Buck, 2001; Hayati, 2009; Kobeleva, 2012). The results of this analysis also suggest that listening passages loaded with non-familiar proper nouns caused an initial

impediment to learners. However, such barriers were lowered once learners became more comfortable with the target language, resulting in near-equal gains for all groups.

A single study cannot set an ordinance for instructional practice. However, the findings suggest a need for educators to assess the conceptual base or starting point from which their learners engage with listening content. From that threshold, providing localized components or activating appropriate background knowledge can help learners lower active filters and raise comprehension. If textbooks and materials focus on authentic English from abroad, students should be sufficiently supplied with difficult vocabulary, complex structures, and cultural content. Various advanced organizers or pre-listening exercises can be successfully incorporated to activate existing knowledge and add new information. When administering standardized exams, assessment tests, and placement situations, it can be helpful to minimize exposure to unfamiliar content, such as foreign proper nouns, because they can cause unwarranted anxiety and result in a negative effect on students' performance.

Exposing learners to natural and authentic speech can help prepare them for communicating in the real world outside the classroom. However, foreign-laden listening components also have the potential to pose perceptual and contextual intimidation if they are out of the reach of students' comprehension. In such situations, materials can become a liability, making both teaching and learning an arduous experience. In contrast, activating what is known about the world can assist in processing aural understanding. If educators endeavor to build upon a foundation of metalingual awareness, background knowledge, and cultural familiarity, learning can become a gratifying experience with positive outcomes. Listening materials can, therefore, be assessed as appropriate and adapted if necessary, for successful application in the classroom.

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The Author

Gordon Carlson is an associate professor at Otemae University where he teaches EFL and Global Japan Studies. His interests include teacher development, CLIL, culturally suitable texts, service learning, and language retention through interactive activities and games.

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