Field: Listening

The Circular Mechanism of "Listening Stress":
Addressing Its Debilitative Effects

NORO, Tokuji (Hirosaki University)

1. Introduction

As a learner variable presumably influencing second/foreign language (L2/FL) listening, listening anxiety has been much discussed and investigated for its effects on the L2/FL listening process (e.g., Vogely, 1999). This construct, however, has predominantly been viewed as being specific to the individual learner and thus being rather stable, instead of fluctuating according to each particular situation. Therefore, the real-time effects of listening anxiety on the comprehension process have neither been directly examined, nor has their debilitative mechanism been explained adequately. As an alternative to listening anxiety, the present author introduced the construct of "listening stress," based on Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) psychological stress theory, and attempted to explicate the psychological inhibition presumably resulting from psychological tenseness, irritation, frustration, and the like that L2/FL learners experience in the face of listening difficulties (Noro, 2006, 2007, etc.). Among its most notable characteristics is the so-called "vicious circle," in which L2/FL listeners report incremental stress debilitating comprehension and the debilitated comprehension increasing stress in turn.

The present study attempts to evidence the above-mentioned circular mechanism, with a view to future explication of the entire mechanism of listening stress. It also aims to revise and validate the stress-induction technique which the present author developed in order to measure the debilitative effects of listening stress.

2. Method

The present study was conducted in a case study approach with five Japanese college students as participants. They were asked to listen to six different listening passages and answer comprehension questions provided for each passage in Japanese. Passage 1 is of an elementary level (60 words), designed as a control material to relax the participants. Passages 2, 4, and 6 are of an intermediate level and supposedly of the same difficulty level (approx. 150 words), while Passages 3 and 5 are of an advanced level and much longer (approx. 450 words) than the other four passages. Passages 3 and 5 were expected to arouse listening stress. Passages 4 and 6 were designed to measure the possible debilitative effects of listening stress on their comprehension in comparison with the comprehension level of Passage 2, which was to be marked as the baseline. Measurement of stress was conducted with a five-point Likert scale after each passage, along with a questionnaire survey regarding the participants' listening process.
3. Results and Discussion

Figure 1 shows the summary of the interaction between listening stress and comprehension. The bars show the level of comprehension of each listening, with the average comprehension by the question type provided for Passages 2, 4, and 6, while the line indicates the transition of the listening stress reported by the participants.

![Figure 1: LC-LS Interaction by the question type](image)

Although each individual participant shows his/her own unique experience of listening stress and its effects on comprehension, which is to be analyzed and discussed in detail in the presentation, the overall pattern represents the circular arousal of listening stress as comprehension declines gradually. The inference type of questions seems to be the most vulnerable to stress, presumably because of the heavy cognitive load which it places on listeners in processing information. The technique which was revised and employed in the present study turned out to be quite effective in inducing stress and measuring its debilitating effects as well as delineating the circular mechanism of listening stress.

References


