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Donald Einer Bjarnson

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An Innovative Listening Comprehension Approach vs.

Donald Einer Bjarnson
Brigham Young University

A listening comprehension approach to second language teaching/learning was tested by operationalizing it in an instructional treatment and controlling for the effects of the approach by contrasting the learning outcomes with those of a control group receiving a more conventional audio-visual instructional approach. Three teachers taught Estonian to a total of 24 subjects of varying ages and language background. One teacher instructed one class of each treatment, while the second and third teachers instructed respectively an experimental and a control class. Essentially the same lexical, grammatical and notional aspects were presented in both treatments, the differences obtaining in methodological approach, sequence, context and sometimes in emphasis. After approximately 15 hours of Estonian language instruction, subjects were tested to determine their acquired skills in listening and reading comprehension, vocabulary acquisition, grammar, writing, pronunciation and coping communication. Language aptitude and background as well as attitude, motivation, expectation and other affective factors were also measured via tests and questionnaires.

Because of attrition and disqualification, findings for this study were based on data gathered from only 15 subjects.
A multivariate statistical analysis (Rummage Program) run on the data revealed no significant variation between the two methods.

2. The Pilot Study

2.1 Objectives and Hypotheses

In the literature we read that students in second language courses which stress listening comprehension begin speaking the foreign language voluntarily in class within the first twenty hours of in-class work (cf. Asher, Postovsky, Nord, Ingram, Blair, Terrell, Winitz). The claim is made that students in listening comprehension courses compare favorably with students in cognitive-code and audio-lingual courses in regards to production of the target language, even though the former are never forced to speak the foreign tongue while the latter are from the outset (cf. especially Asher and Postovsky). We also read from these same sources that students in listening comprehension courses do not undergo the counter productive anxiety and fear commonly experienced among students in cognitive-code and audio-lingual courses. The proposed theoretical rationale for the above is essentially that when people are confronted with learning a foreign language in an academic environment which initially stresses the ability to comprehend the language rather than speak it, this then approximates the natural environment in which a baby learns his mother tongue. In such an environment students can focus their entire attention on building language competence through listening with understanding. After listening fluency (or competence) reaches a certain level of complexity and
sophistication, performance or production is naturally triggered and students begin to speak in the target language. If forced prematurely to speak L2, students may become apprehensive and be slowed or even blocked in learning the language, especially when forced speaking is coupled with high expectancy for perfection in language production.

The overall objective of the experiment discussed below was to determine whether or not a strictly listening comprehension approach to language teaching/learning is a justifiable option to more conventional cognitive-code/audio-lingual or -visual methodologies. Specifically, the following hypotheses needed to be tested:

(a) Listening comprehension training by itself enables subjects to begin expressing themselves in the target language within 15 hours of instruction.

(b) Listening comprehension training by itself enables subjects to attain a comparable level of achievement in communicating through the target language within 15 hours of instruction to that of a more conventional method in which speaking is practiced within the same time period.

(c) Within 15 hours of instruction, listening comprehension training by itself enables subjects to achieve significantly better results in the listening comprehension skill than does conventional training in which listening and speaking are practiced.
(d) Within 15 hours of instruction, subjects in a more conventional language course in which speaking is practiced will achieve significantly better results in pronunciation of the target language than will subjects who undergo the same amount of training time in a strictly listening comprehension course.

(e) Within 15 hours of instruction, subjects in a more conventional language course in which morphology and syntax of the target language is focused on and accompanying oral drills and other oral exercises are executed will achieve significantly better results in grammar than will subjects who undergo the same amount of training time in a strictly listening comprehension course in which grammar aspects receive less focused attention, and, if focused on, are practiced only through comprehension exercises.

(f) Within 15 hours of instruction subjects in a more conventional language course in which the written language is introduced early and is used throughout the instruction to impart data to them will do significantly better in reading comprehension and writing than will subjects who undergo the same amount of training time in a strictly listening comprehension course in which a negligible amount of the written word is introduced at the end of their training.

3. Experimental Design

The above hypotheses were tested by operationalizing a listening comprehension approach to second language teaching/learning, and controlling for the effects of the approach by
contrasting the learning outcomes with those of a control group receiving a more conventional cognitive-code/audio-visual instructional approach.

Teacher and intra-group effect was intended to be controlled by dividing the subjects into four classes - two classes for each treatment group. Class assignment was largely determined by the subjects' scheduling constraints, and thus was deemed effectively arbitrary. However, this largely non-random assignment later turned out to be a statistical thorn in the study's side. The perfect cross-teacher paradigm required two teachers to each teach one class of both treatments. Two teachers were procured, but the schedule of one of the teachers permitted him to teach only one class. Unfortunately, no other person qualified to teach Estonian, the target language, could be found whose schedule was flexible enough to subsume the teaching of two different classes. Now that the cross-teacher experimental design could not be realized, it was decided to obtain a third person to instruct the remaining class, thus allowing for a comparison to be made between the classes, and therefore between the two methods, through a multi-variate statistical analysis of variants.

As a further attempt to equalize the groups, group means were adjusted or estimated by two valid predictors of foreign language learning success acting as covariates. The Hawthorne effect was controlled by telling all the subjects that they were involved in an experiment and by fostering the feeling amongst
them that all four classes were receiving experimental treatments of equal validity and innovation. Also, a post-course questionnaire was filled out by the subjects which, among other things, asked them to rate the teacher both personality-wise and teaching-wise, as well as rate the course in general. These measurements allowed for an additional means to determine any significant teacher effect or treatment-teacher interaction.

Initial fluctuation in subject population was caused by a sharp increase after the introductory lecture and a decrease following the first instructional class. By the second instructional meeting, the subject population had stabilized to 24. Figure 9 shows how the 24 subjects were divided up between the three teachers.

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Fig. 9. Subject and Teacher Constituency of Classes at the Beginning of the Course

3.1 Subjects

Most of the people who registered for the class were university students. There were, however, a group of younger children and adolescents (from 8-16 years old), as well as a
group of older individuals from the community. Table 1 Sample Population Characteristics delineates the sex, age, foreign language and culture background, language aptitude score (MLAT), and several other affective measures of the 15 subjects who remained at the end of the course after attrition and disqualification had claimed 9 of the original 24 subjects.

3.2 Target Language: Estonian

Estonian was chosen as the target language in this experiment because: 1) it is totally unrelated to English, and 2) it was safe to assume that most people living in the area had never heard the language spoken before (nor had most of them even heard of Estonian or Estonia, as we soon discovered). Thus, the possibility for experiment contamination due to previous contact with the language or knowledge of its makeup was negligible.

Subject #13 had been exposed to a limited amount of Estonian in listening to a few conversations between his new Estonian wife and her parents, but this previous minute exposure to the target language was considered inconsequential in terms of the present study.

Estonian is a member of the Baltic-Finnic languages which include Livonian, Votic, Vepsian, Estonian, Ingrian, Carelian, and Finnish. This group of languages is one branch of the Finno-Ugric languages, of which Hungarian (a Ugrian language) and Finnish figure as the most widely used and well known. All together, there are some 24 million people who speak Finno-Ugric languages.
### SAMPLE POPULATION CHARACTERISTICS

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Table 1. Sample Population Characteristics

*Self-views were rated along a 5 point Likert scale.*
Estonian is spoken by about 950,000 people in Estonia, 10-15 thousand in Sweden, 30-35 thousand in Canada and the United States, and several thousand more elsewhere (chiefly in Australia, England, and Germany).

3.3 Experimental Course: Learning Estonian Through Listening Comprehension

The listening comprehension method used in the experimental course was a combination of Asher's TPR technique and a modified version of Nord's Sens-it System, along with certain elements of Winitz' OHR, Lozanov's Suggestopedia, and Gattegno's Silent Way (cf. Sources at the end of this paper to obtain bibliographic particulars on all the authors mentioned herein). While the TPR technique and the Sens-it System took up the majority of class time, Suggestopedia's influence was seen in the relaxation phase at the beginning of each meeting, together with music interspersed at appropriate moments throughout the lesson. The Silent Way and OHR influenced the order of material presentation - specifically, numeration was presented first as these two methods propose.

The experimental course is composed of 12 lessons which were presented to the students in seven 2-hour classes plus one class one hour in length. Each lesson is divided into two parts: 1) Greetings, Relaxation and TPR and 2) the Tape Script and Student Manual.

The following basic topics were covered in the 12 lessons: 1) numeration, 2) some animals, 3) colors, 4) some verbs, 5) fam-
ily members, 6) personal pronouns, 7) some opposites, 8) expressions of time, 9) body parts, and 10) eating and drinking.

3.4 Control Course: The American Method

The American Method (a catchall term coined by Grittner) is an attempt at combining into a synergistic whole the most current thinking of leading foreign language teaching educators concerning what should belong in a teaching methodology. The result is a rather intriguing synergism of cognitive-code, audio-lingual and audio-visual techniques and principles. With the emphasis initially on comprehension and then on interaction in the target language, innovators in L2 pedagogy mentioned in sections 2 and 3.3 might be moved to call the American Method an "enlightened cognitive-code/audio-visual" approach.

A host of "neo-behaviorist" educators have influenced the formulation of the American Method, most notably Carroll, Rivers, Bennett, Grittner, Jarvis, Belasco, Valette, Politzer, Lafayette, Lambert, Mueller, Oller, Wringe, Wood, Pillet, and Palmer (yes, the Palmer who wrote about language teaching some 60 years ago!). Of these individuals Rivers, Bennett, Grittner, and Palmer have provided the most inspiration and direction in the method's creation.

There are four lessons in the American Method. The basic format followed in each of these is as follows:
Phase 1: Greetings and Orientation
Teacher touches briefly on the notion and structure which will be covered in the day's lesson.

Phase 2: Audioscript
The audioscript presents the basic vocabulary to be learned and around which the structural exercises are built. In lessons 3 and 4 there are more than one audioscript, but the same procedure as is herein outlined is adhered to for each audioscript. Students follow along in their manuals which contain pictures illustrating the text. Lesson 2's audioscript has some of the text written out in certain pictures in order to help clarify the meaning of the audioscript. Lesson 3's audioscripts have even more of the text written out along with the pictures. Some of the new vocabulary is translated also. Lesson 4's audioscripts are written out completely with no accompanying pictures.

Phase 3: Repetition of Audioscript

Phase 4: Idiomatic Expressions
Idiomatic expressions in the audioscripts are explained here. Only lessons 1 and 2 have this phase.

Phase 5: Repetition of Audioscript
Any questions concerning the audioscript are answered. Lessons 3 and 4 do not call for listening to the audioscripts three times, but questions concerning the scripts are to be answered during the second listening.
Phase 6: Vocabulary Testing/Building

Vocabulary is reviewed and extended into different situations through various exercises involving the matching of pictures to their correct descriptions, passage comprehension multiple choice, and true/false quizzes (all the foregoing exercises are found in the student manuals).

Phase 7: Pronunciation of the Audioscript

The audioscripts are read by the teacher in increasingly larger segments as the students repeat after him. Beginning with lesson 3's audioscript II the students read the script and pronounce it.

Phase 8: Minimal Pair Contrast

In lessons 1 and 2 students are asked to listen to minimal pair sentences and decide whether the pairs differ or are the same. Isolated features are length, palatalization and Estonian phonemes (e.g. ĕ, Į, and Š). In lesson 3 the minimal pairs from lessons 1 and 2 are read by the students.

Phase 9: Communication Activity I

This phase should last anywhere from 20 minutes to an hour. The teacher creates a framework for interpersonal communication based on notions in the audioscripts, and he leads the students into participating through speaking the target language.
Phase 10: Structure

This phase should take up at least half of the class time. Each lesson focuses on different facets of syntax and morphology and presents the material via examples. Students practice the material through substitution, incremental, and communication exercises.

Phase 11: Communication Activity II

This culminating activity may be a continuation of Communication Activity I, or it could be the development of a completely different notion.

The following notions are presented in the lessons:

Lesson 1: names, greetings and getting acquainted
Lesson 2: eating and drinking, in a restaurant, numbers 1-21
Lesson 3: body parts, sickness and health, at the doctor's office, numbers 30-99
Lesson 4: expressions of time, family members, discussion over a film, feeling sorry for oneself, discussing personal data such as age, where from, etc.

The following structure is presented in the lessons:

Lesson 1: personal pronouns, present tense of olla and other verbs
Lesson 2: intonation patterns for interrogative sentences, transforming statements to questions; answering different kinds of questions; present/future tense of verbs; past tense; some irregular verbs in the past; present
and past perfect tenses; the nominative, genitive, adessive, allative, ablative, elative, commitative, and partitive cases of the personal pronouns; the nominative singular and plural, as well as the genitive/accusative singular and plural of nouns.

Lesson 3: different word orders in sentences; negative present and past perfect tenses; imperative; the transitive and elative cases of nouns

Lesson 4: the singular and plural partitive case of nouns

Some of the notional and structural material was borrowed from Felix Oinas’ Basic Course in Estonian, Haman’s Lõrobok i estniska, Vääri’s Eesti keele õpik keskkoolile, and Eisen’s Aabits.

3.5 Measurement of Variables

The Eesti keele lõpueksam (Estonian language final test) was designed to measure the dependent variables writing, grammar, vocabulary acquisition, reading comprehension, listening comprehension, and coping communication skill. The coping communication skill was actually measured in a separate oral test and was broken down into the variables comprehension, oral response, pronunciation, and grammar. The final test was divided up into 10 sections, each of which was intended to measure one or more of the dependent variables within certain contexts. The entire final was given the value of 100 points and a certain number of points was ascribed to each of the sections. Table 2 displays an analysis of the sections according to which variable(s) they are measuring and what context they are measuring them in. The
weight or amount of points ascribed to each section is also
given.

It is evident from Table 2 that the final test concerns
itself mostly with the dependent variables vocabulary acquisition
(total weight of 26), listening comprehension (total weight of
25), and coping communication skill (total weight of 20).
These aspects, after all, occupied a majority of class time in
the control classes, while, for experimental purposes, only the
first two did so in the experimental classes. There were, of
course, differences in the way the two methods approached the
first two variables: solely listening comprehension (following
issued commands as well as the workbook exercises) was used in
the experimental course to learn new vocabulary, while listening
comprehension (following instructions, commands and compre-
hending the teacher in conversation with him), reading, speaking
and a negligible amount of writing were used for this purpose
in the control course.

4. The Findings

Analysis of the data showed no significant variation due to
method in the dependent variables nor in affect, as well. Anec-
dotal data did reveal some interesting factors, but nothing of
a conclusive nature. Similarly, no significant teacher effect
or subject-teacher interaction was discovered.
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Following Verbal Commands

Listening comprehension following verbal commands directed to individual subjects in private 25

Oral response to teacher while conversing with him 5

Oral response while conversing with teacher 5

Oral response while conversing with teacher 5

Table 2. Analysis of Final Test Sections According to Dependent Variables Measured, Contexts in Which They are Measured, and the Weighting Ascribed to Each Section.
4.1 Discussion

The preceding pages have shown clearly that due to the adverse circumstances surrounding the pilot study, controls on certain variables were not tight enough and the subject sample was not large enough to produce highly reliable and significant statistics. Indeed, it would require a truly extraordinary inter-method variation in subject test scores for variance between the methods to reach a significant level, given such a small sample. Needless to say, if there had been true randomization in assigning the subjects to the different classes, or even better, if subjects in the control classes could have been matched age-wise and in every other way with the subjects in the experimental classes, the statistics engendered by the study would certainly have been considered more reliable.

All things considered, the lack of significant variance between the two methods suggests therefore the following concerning the hypotheses set down in 2.1: hypotheses (a) and (b) were proven correct in that the subjects in the listening comprehension course (the experimental course) were, statistically speaking, able to speak Estonian equally as well as (and in some individual cases even better than) subjects in the more conventional control course. Strangely enough, hypothesis (c) regarding the expectation of significantly better results in the listening comprehension skill by those who receive training exclusively in that skill than by those trained in a more conventional fashion did not bear out in the present study. Perhaps high within-group
variations can best explain this rather illogical outcome. Hypothesis (d) concerning the expectation of significantly better pronunciation by subjects receiving training in speaking the target language than by those who receive training only in listening comprehension seemed to be borne out by the statistics. The same goes for the writing aspect of hypothesis (f) which proposed that subjects specifically trained in reading in a more conventional course will perform significantly better in reading comprehension and writing than will subjects in a course where only listening comprehension is experienced. However, as explained above, a closer examination of the treatment means for the variables pronunciation and writing reveals a high degree of within-group variance which renders the difference in these areas between the two methods superficial at best and thus uninteresting. It was actually no surprise that hypothesis (e) was not proven correct. Several studies have shown that subjects who have undergone training in vocabulary acquisition, listening comprehension and/or oral communication and have not focused on grammar per se tend to do just about as well in this factor as do subjects who have received a great deal more concentrated instruction on grammatical aspects of the target language. The present study has produced a little more evidence supporting this last-mentioned tendency.

Finally on the basis of this pilot study, statistical, affective, and anecdotal data, as well as this writer's intuitive
feelings all join to corroborate the general proposition that a strictly listening comprehension approach to language teaching/learning is a justifiable option, at least in the beginning phase, to more conventional cognitive-code/audio-lingual or audio-visual methodologies. Further research and experimentation are needed either to nullify or verify the hypothesis that subjects possessing inferior language aptitude tend to learn languages more efficiently and with less anxiety in courses stressing listening training than they do in conventional courses.
References


Asher 1972a (James J.) Children's First Language as a Model for Second Language Learning. MLJ 56. 133-139


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