Two Phases of Language Learning—Oral and Written

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There has been much discussion over the past decades as to which is more effective as a language learning method, to lay emphasis on the acquisition of practical skills or to pursue a somewhat nebulous goal of cultural enrichment. The aims of learning a language ought to vary from individual to individual, and the ways of attaining them should differ accordingly. Learners whose chief aim is to acquire reading skill in it naturally tend to make light of other phases of this language learning business. They are not to be blamed for this summarily, because auro-oral drills by themselves do not directly go to increasing one's reading ability. Conversely, only to get theoretic explanation about individual sounds of a language and their combinations and then get drills in them would be worse than useless, if not accompanied by an awareness of the semantic contents they represent. It is so especially in learning a *modern* language.

The purpose of this paper in which various types of tests are to be critically evaluated is to find out whether the reading and listening comprehension are correlated, and, if so, to what extent, especially whether the increase of one skill is conducive to the other. Concurrently we shall examine if the fourfold approach to language learning (that is, through hearing, speaking, reading, and writing it) is as effective as is generally believed.

Before presenting the data that have been furnished by the tests given at different times to some 300 sample students, a few remarks about the nature and significance of our tests and their scoring may be in order. As every experienced teacher knows, it is comparatively easy even at first reading to tell 'excellent' papers from extremely 'poor' ones, which cursory assessment is, in nine cases out of ten, proved correct when actual marking is done and scores are added up. By comparing the scores the teacher can see how much better one examinee has digested a given material than another. There is an important 'but' to this. As in all mundane affairs, luck plays an important part in tests. Did the questions happen to be those parts a student had prepared with special care? Was he under some mental strain or at some physical disadvantage? No student can display uniform level of intellectual efficacy on all occasions. There have to be ups and downs. The same is true of the teacher who prepares questions and marks them. In a word, it is not too much to say that the entirely objective, scientific comparison of data obtained through such tests cannot be expected in real life situations. We must, therefore, be aware in studying the following tables that a numerical figure may not always carry the

same proportion of value in different contexts. And such fluctuation of evaluation may be greater in aural comprehension tests than the other kinds. Robert Lado pointed out in his book *Language Testing* that "written tests may be expected to show a higher coefficient of reliability than oral and auditory tests."(1) Another factor which gives rise to this unreliability of measurement is inherent in the test questions themselves. No examiners can ever be sure that the questions he gave at one time are exactly as difficult or easy as the ones he had given at some previous dates.

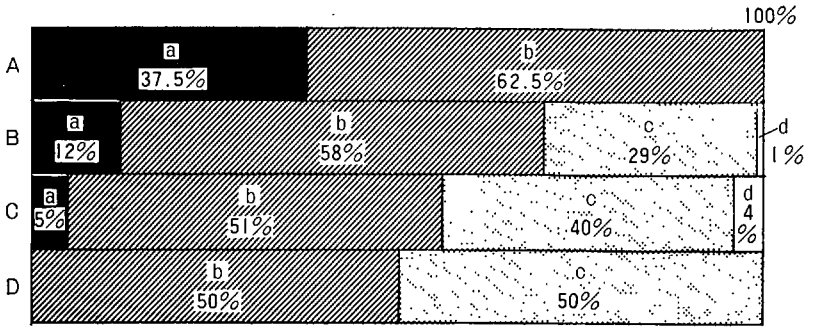
Bearing these factors in mind, we have carried out several experiments, starting in 1965, to see if any correlation can be observed to exist between the marks students achieved for their English papers at the entrance examination and those given to the same students at term-end examinations given a semester or two after they were admitted, our chief curiosity being centered on the existence or non-existence of correlation between reading and listening comprehension abilities.

The first table shows whether or not the gradings for English papers given in the entrance examination hold good, six months later, for the same type of all-round tests so arranged as to gauge the accuracy of reading comprehension, English-sentence-building skills, grammatical analysis, and aural comprehension, prominence being given to the first two. The entrance examination scores, the actual figures not being permitted to be made public, have accordingly been represented under four headings, *A*, *B*, *C*, and *D*, standing for *'Excellent, Good, Fair,* and *Poor,'* in the same order. Those of the term-end examination, (the full mark being 100) are also arranged in four grades, *a*, *b*, *c*, and *d*, for convenience of comparison,(2) in all the tables that follow.

Table 1: English Entrance Examination vs. English Term-end Test in 1965.

Eng.Term-end Exam. \ Eng.Entrance Exam.		D	C	B	A	Total
d	0— 9					0
	10— 19			1		1
	20— 29		3	2		5
	30— 39		2			2
c	40— 49		15	10		25
	50— 59	1	35	45		81
b	60— 69		35	61	1	97
	70— 79	1	28	50	4	83
a	80— 89		5	22	2	29
	90—100		1	1	1	3
Total		2	124	192	8	326

Figure I : Percentile Figures of Table I.



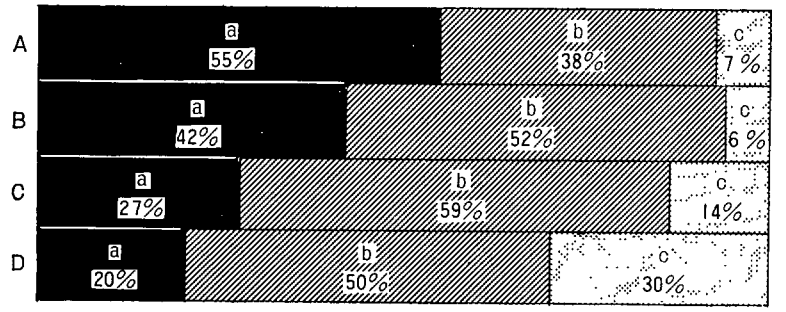
From Fig. I it will be observed that the majority of students who did extremely well in the entrance examination (Group *A*) achieved better scores in the terminal examination as well (Subdivision '*a*' in Group *A*) than those in the other three groups. The scores obtained by intermediate groups *B* and *C* also show a close follow-up to those awarded to them at the time of the entrance examination. Only the last group *D* tends to show slight fluctuations, which, however, are in no case big enough to set us wondering if something has gone wrong along the way. On the whole, the gradings of the students that have taken these two tests are observed to draw approximately identical curves.

Satisfied with these interim findings we then went on to the next stage of our project, the giving of aural comprehension tests to the same set of students. The results were much the same as in the case of the reading and writing tests, as is shown by the following table.

Table II : Aural Test in Entrance Examination vs. Aural Test in Term-end Test.

Term-end / Ent. Exam.	c 1—9	b 10—19	a 20—30	
D	9	15	6	30
C	23	96	45	164
B	5	40	32	77
A	4	21	30	55
	41	172	113	326

Figure II : Percentile Figures of Table II.

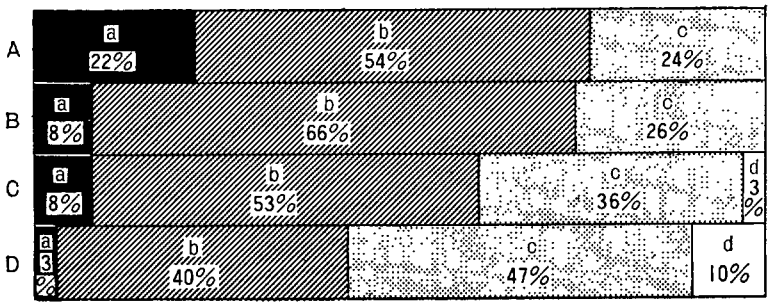


After this comparison of scores obtained by the same set of students in the two tests of *similar* nature aimed at measuring their reading-writing and aural comprehension abilities, given at different times with a six-month interval in between, we proceeded to ascertain what results they would show in two *different* kinds of tests, one being the all-round examination given at the term-end, and the other the aural test they had already gone through in the entrance examination. Fig. III indicates that one's aural comprehension ability is positively correlated with one's reading ability though not as closely as in the case of the same sort of tests.

Table III : Aural Test in Entrance Exam vs. All-round Test at the Term-end in 1965.

T. E. All-round / E. E. Aural	d				c		b		a		
	0—9	10—19	20—29	30—39	40—49	50—59	60—69	70—79	80—89	90—100	
D		1	1	1	5	9	3	9	1		30
C			4	1	14	45	57	30	12	1	164
B					6	14	27	24	5	1	77
A						13	10	20	11	1	55
	0	1	5	2	25	81	97	83	29	3	326

Figure III : Percentile Figure of Table III.



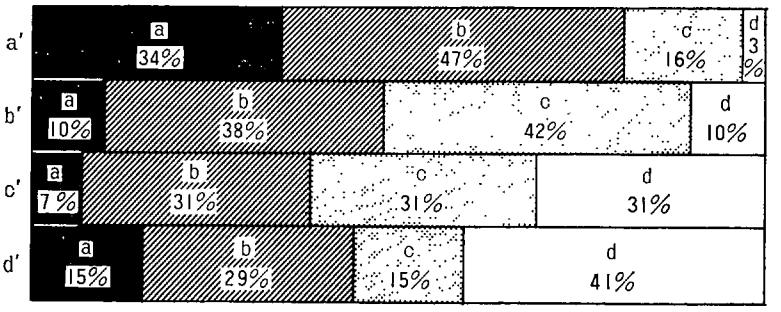
In the following three cases, we quoted the scores of two different types of tests on French to be compared with those of the entrance examination given in 1968. French is a newly introduced subject to most of the sample students, who are supposed to be eager to pursue this so far unknown field of study with fresh interest. So, we have assumed that the achievement on it might represent faithfully their aptitude to the language learning.

The first comparison was made between the scores of the test on grammar and those of listening comprehension test at the end of the summer term in 1968. The coefficient of correlation on it is 0.30, which may be considered fairly, though not fully, reliable.

Table IV: French Aural Test vs. French Grammar Test in 1968.

Grammar Test \ Aural Test		d′				c′		b′		a′		Total
		0—9	10—19	20—29	30—39	40—49	50—59	60—69	70—79	80—89	90—100	
d	0— 9			2								2
	10— 19											0
	20— 29			2	1	1						4
	30— 39			3	3	4	5	2	5	3	2	27
c	40— 49			2	1	1	5	7	8	8	1	33
	50— 59			1		3	1	8	8	9	6	36
b	60— 69		1	1	3	4	4	5	12	14	12	56
	70— 79			1	2	1	1	4	7	17	30	63
a	80— 89			1	1	1	1	2	5	9	20	40
	90—100			2						7	16	25
Total		0	1	15	11	15	17	28	45	67	87	286

Figure IV: Percentile Figures of Table IV.



The next table shows how the entrance examination scores on English (all-round questions) go with the term-end test scores on French grammar. The coefficient of correlation is 0.34 which suggests greater reliability than the first case.

The result of the last comparison, that is, between the English entrance examination and the French aural test at the term-end, is less correlated than in the preceding two cases.

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Our first objective in conducting these experiments was to find out whether the development of one kind of linguistic skill will be conducive to that of the other skills. We cannot draw any definite conclusion from these very limited data

Table V : English Entrance Exam vs. French Grammar Test in 1968.

French Grammar \ Eng. Entrance Exam.		D	C	B	A	Total
d	0— 9			2		2
	10— 19					0
	20— 29		1	5		6
	30— 39		5	21	1	27
c	40— 49		4	24	5	33
	50— 59		3	29	4	36
b	60— 69		6	45	5	56
	70— 79		5	50	7	62
a	80— 89		4	30	5	39
	90—100		2	17	6	25
Total		0	30	223	33	286

Table VI : English Entrance Exam vs. French Aural Test in 1968.

French Aural \ Eng. Entrance Exam.		D	C	B	A	Total
d	0— 9					0
	10— 19			1		1
	20— 29		3	10	1	14
	30— 39		3	7	1	11
c	40— 49		4	11		15
	50— 59		2	14	1	17
b	60— 69		1	23	4	28
	70— 79		6	36	5	47
a	80— 89		5	53	8	66
	90—100		6	69	13	88
Total		0	30	224	33	287

Figure V . Percentile Figures of Table V.

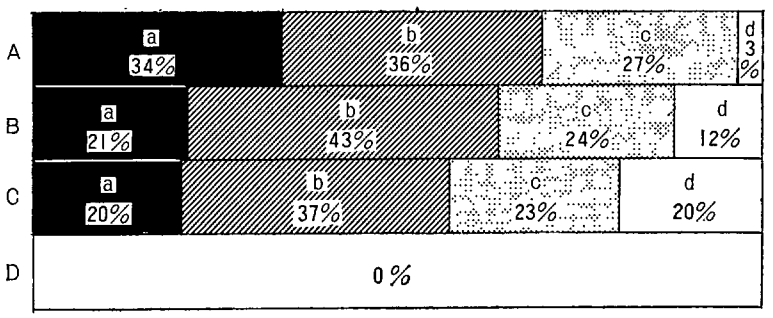
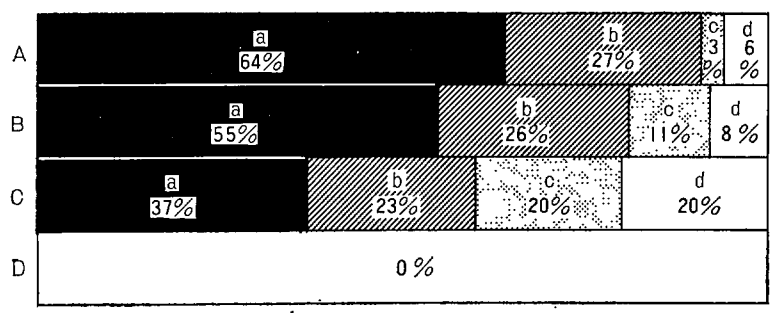


Figure VI Percentile Figures of Table VI.



whose validity remains to be proved. The important thing, however, as mentioned earlier, is reliability of the test itself, on the individual questions of which depends the validity of the whole process. It must be admitted at once that we have not always had firm enough conviction in the appropriateness of the tests we have used, especially aural tests, though we have taken as much pains with each one of them as was feasible under the circumstances. Apart from this diffidence and apprehension, however, we think we can safely say that the results of the experiments show that the aural ability is correlated positively with the reading ability —although the degree of correlation differs from individual to individual, as, for example, students who had done extremely well in written tests failed to achieve equally high marks in aural tests. The existence of correlation between the two skills, thus proved, supports us in our belief that auro-oral drills will not, as was once believed, retard the progress of the learner's reading and writing abilities. Stated in a positive way, the fourfold approach is more effective in learning a language, especially at the initial stages.

Concerning this interaction of the four phases of language learning, John B. Carroll writes in *The Study of Language:*

> "There are elements common to the two enterprises of teaching oral and written English: the structural features of the language are the same, and there are the same problems of meaning, creativity, and interpretation. Furthermore, if we accept the notion that competence in spoken language somehow underlies competence in writing it, an integration program makes much sense. On the other hand, certain special requirements in each phase would make complete integration difficult."(3)

What are the "certain requirements" in spoken language John B. Carroll seems to have had in mind when writing the above message? It is not difficult to imagine that the first of these is the following. In oral communication a certain amount of superfluous repetition slips in of sound and syntactical elements which may not be noticed by the other person and which are usually pruned in written form. A research shows that in spoken English there is 50 per cent of redundancy on an average.(4) If the listener cannot quickly discard this redundancy from his consciousness, he will miss the essential parts of the contents of any particular oral communication. Of the other requirements—no less important than the redundancy—we might safely infer that he meant sound discriminations, intonation patterns, pitch levels. In Japan, English speech-forming drills have been sadly neglected in junior and senior high schools, which is largely responsible for the alarming majority of college students failing to comprehend even the simplest language material when spoken, easy enough to be understood even by junior high school pupils when presented in written form.

This tendency to give to the auro-oral drills in language learning an entirely unmerited cold treatment seems to obtain not only in Japan but in other countries as well. John B. Carroll says:

> "Any analysis of the nature and functions of language will show that oral communication, in both its expressive and its receptive phases, is of prime importance. This is one of the facts

emphasized by linguistic scientists but strangely neglected, at least until recently, in our whole scheme of education."[5]

And Nelson Brooks writes in his book *Language and Language Learning:*

"... the learning of language as communication implies the use of many more types of activity than have traditionally been employed in language testing. The new field is now being employed with some success. For example, it has recently been discovered that listening comprehension is a factor in language behavior that lends itself remarkably well to measurement and such tests are now coming into general use."[6]

In our secondary schools, little, if any, effort has been expended so far to help the pupils to acquire aural ability of the language they learn. Why is the oral-aural aspect as neglected as it is not only in our junior and senior high schools but also in our colleges and universities? Is it because the teachers fight shy of the drills, being convinced, as many of them are, of their lack of equipment in the two important aspects of language communication, speaking the language they teach and understanding it when spoken? The answer is yes. But there is another reason. Part of, if not the whole, the blame should be borne by the type of English questions given in the college entrance examination, which influences, of necessity, the trends of English teaching in high schools. If proper tests are given in college entrance examination for aural comprehension of English, those high school students who want to go on to college will come to have more intensive aural-oral drills in English while at high school. At college level each individual student ought to determine for himself what particular language skills will be most needed for the career he is going to follow, but in secondary schools teachers of English should devise their lessons so as to encourage their pupils to acquire aural-oral skills along with those of reading and writing. As has been made clear by our investigation, limited indeed but sufficient for the purpose, there undoubtedly is a reliable measure of correlation between the aural-oral skills and the reading-writing skills, and we come to the conclusion that some form of English aural-comprehension tests are to be given in the college entrance examination, if only to increase the reliability of the measurement of the applicants' general command of English. The type of English questions given in our college entrance examination so far is open to criticism, and everybody feels the need for some drastic revision, but even as things stand now, adoption of aural tests in the college entrance examination will lead high school teachers to pay more attention to this vital branch of language teaching, and their pupils will benefit in the long run. In Hitotsubashi University, aural comprehension tests, mostly in the form of 'dictation' have been given since the early nineteen hundreds, despite technical difficulties attendant on their execution. If more universities and colleges in Japan adopt English aural-comprehension tests to supplement the traditional translation papers, the teaching of English in our junior and senior high schools will before long begin to show marked improvements, more fully rounded and more satisfactory both for practical purposes and cultural enrichment.

The importance of aural-oral drills at the early stages of language learning

cannot be overemphasized. Once the learner has acquired the correct pronunciation of the target language during these initial periods, he will come to understand spoken English with greater ease, since it is all a question of recognizing the actual sounds as those he is now fully acquainted with and automatically forming the semantic contents they are intended to evoke, unit by unit. What is more important, he will come to read faster, for he stumbles less in his 'silent' articulation and is less hampered in his association of sound and sense.

Notes

(1) Robert Lado: *Language Testing*. p. 332. Longmans, 1961.

(2) Some of these have been published in "Eigo Kyoiku" ("The English Teachers' Magazine"), Vol. XV, No. 7. Taishukan, 1966. The more up-to-date data are not available at the time of writing because of the disruption of educational activities due to student-college disputes.

(3) John B. Carroll: *The Study of Language*. p. 159. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1955.

(4) Wilga M. Rivers: *Teaching Foreign-Languages Skills*. p. 138. The University of Chicago Press, 1968.

(5) John B. Carroll· *The Study of Language*. p. 158.

(6) Nelson Brooks; *Language and Language Learning*. p. 160. New York, Harcourt Brace, 1960.