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Does Repeated Exposure Affect Performance on an L2 Dictation Task Differently According to Proficiency Level?

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1. Introduction

In this study, I examined the interaction effect of repetition and proficiency level. For this study, repetition refers to the number of times a listening passage should be played. It is one factor which needs to be considered for second language (L2) listening test development (e.g., Brindley, 1998; Buck, 2001; Rost, 2002; Thompson, 1995). Repetition is one task condition which may lead to redundancy in the input.

As Sakai (2009) argued, the issue of whether repetition and proficiency level exhibit any interaction effect is important for fair test administration. If differential effects of repetition are observed for L2 learners with various proficiency levels, a limited number of the test takers will benefit from the repeated exposure.

In this article, I report two studies that investigated the interaction effect of repeated exposure and proficiency level, using an L2 dictation task.

2. Previous Studies

Generally speaking, previous studies have shown that repetition facilitates listening comprehension (e.g., Berne, 1995). However, for the interaction effect of repetition and proficiency level, mixed results were reported. On the one hand, Lund (1991) and Chang and Read (2006) argued that repetition may be more beneficial for more advanced proficiency levels than for lower proficiency levels. On the other hand, Cervantes and Gainers (1992) and Jimura (2007) did not find such interaction effects.

Sakai (2009) pointed out that these studies used different assessment tasks and discussed that mixed results may be due to the task differences. In addition, Sherman (1997) pointed out that previewing questions as in multiple-choice tasks used by Chang and Read (2006) may facilitate listening comprehension. So in order to avoid the confounding effect of previewing questions, Sakai (2009) used an L2 free written recall task. The participants were 36 Japanese university students, who were divided into the high listening proficiency group (HG) and the low listening proficiency group (LG). The results showed that no statistically significant interaction effect of repetition and proficiency level was found. Thus, Sakai's

(2009) results confirmed Cervantes and Gainer (1992) and Iimura (2007), but did not support Lund (1991) and Chang and Read (2006). Sakai (2009) pointed out that Chang and Read (2006) argued that interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level were observed; nevertheless, a careful examination of their results suggested that there were non-interaction effects. Lund (1991) found a statistically significant interaction effect only in one of the two analyses, that is, in the lexical item analysis, not in the idea unit analysis, of the recall protocols.

In summary, studies using a free written recall task (a lexical analysis, Lund, 1991) detected an interaction effect, whereas studies using a free written recall task (idea unit analysis, Lund, 1991; Sakai, 2009), a partial dictation task (Cervantes & Gainer, 1992), or an open-ended question task (Iimura, 2007) did not find such effects. The free written recall task requires test takers to understand every part of the passage but the scoring based on the idea unit is not as detailed as the lexical analysis. The partial dictation task and the open-ended question task do not require test takers to understand every part. Thus, Sakai (2009) suggested that detailed scoring systems and the task which requires test takers to understand every part of the text may be necessary to detect the differential effect of repetition. Then a question arose: With detailed scoring systems such as the exact word method for dictation tasks, were the interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level found? This question guided the first study.

3. Study 1

3.1 Research Question

The first study utilized a detailed scoring method and posited the following research question: Do repetition and proficiency level exhibit any interaction effect?

3.2 Participants

The participants were 43 Japanese university students, who were divided into two groups: the higher listening proficiency group (HG, $n = 25$) and the lower listening proficiency group (LG, $n = 18$). The division was based on the scores of the listening sections ($k = 60$) of three forms (A, B, and C) of the Michigan English Placement Test (MEPT, Corrigan, Dobson, Kellman, Spaan, & Tyma, 1993). The results were as follows: $M = 35.42$, $SD = 7.16$, $\alpha = .78$. The mean score was used as a cut-off point: That is, those who got 36 or above were assigned to HG ($M = 40.08$, $SD = 3.97$); and those who got 35 or below were assigned to LG ($M = 28.94$, $SD = 5.29$). The two groups were significantly different in terms of their listening proficiency: $t(41) = 7.90$, $p < .000$.

3.3 The Task

The task was an L2 dictation task, in which participants were asked to listen to an English passage and write in English everything they heard. It should be noted that, for this study, the participants were not allowed to take notes while listening and that the passage was played without any special pauses.

3.4 Materials

The listening passage for this study was derived from the Pre-2nd grade of STEP, and the attached CD was used (Obunsha, 2004b). The pre-second grade is targeted at the senior high school level (for more information about the STEP, see <http://stepeiken.org/>). The passage was a monologue narrative and was read by a male. The following is the passage:

Passage 1 for Study 1 (Mary's Lunch Time)

Mary works as a secretary. She usually has lunch at a noodle shop near her office. But yesterday it was closed, so she went to an Italian restaurant and had some spaghetti. Before she went back to her office, she stopped at a café and had dessert.

The passage contains 47 words in four sentences; the duration of the recording is 19 seconds; and the pace of reading was 148 words per minute.

3.5 Procedures

The participants listened to Passage 1 and wrote everything they remembered in English on a blank sheet of paper. After all of the participants completed writing, they were asked to turn the sheet over and listened to the same passage for the second dictation. After the dictation task under the repetition condition, the participants were shown the passage script and given the chance to listen to the recording one more time. Then, they were asked to underline unknown words on the script.

3.6 Analysis

For scoring of the protocols in the dictation performance, the exact word method was employed: That is, one point was allotted to one word. Since the number of words in the passage was 47, the possible maximum score was 47. I scored all the dictation protocols. I did not calculate reliability indices because the scoring system was mechanical and objective.

In order to test the interaction effect of repetition and proficiency level, I performed a two-way ANOVA with time being a within-subjects factor (two levels: the first listening and the second listening) and with proficiency level as a between-subjects factor (two levels: HG and LG) after checking the assumptions for the analysis. I also calculated Pearson's correlation coefficients as effect sizes (Field, 2005, pp. 514-516). Field (p. 33) provided the following criteria: .50 or above for a large effect, .30 to .50 for a medium effect, and .10 to .30 for a small effect.

3.7 Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of dictation performance by group and time (see also Figure 1). The results showed that the mean score for HG was 18.20 on the first listening, and increased by 13.24 points to 31.44 on the second listening; similarly, LG improved from 11.89 on the first listening to 23.89 on the second listening, and the difference was 12.00. Thus, first, the results showed that both groups benefited from the repetition of listening. Second, both groups seemed to be the same in their improvement. That is, both groups improved to the similar degree.

After checking the assumptions for a statistical analysis in terms of univariate or multivariate outliers, normality (Shapiro-Wilk test & Kolmogorov-Smimov test), and the skewness and the kurtosis, I performed a two-way ANOVA. The results of the ANOVA supported the above observation. First, the main effect of time was statistically significant, and the effect size was large: $F(1, 41) = 227.30, p = .000, r = .92$. In other words, repetition statistically significantly facilitated listening comprehension. Second, the main effect of proficiency level was statistically significant, and the effect size was medium: $F(1, 41) = 9.89, p = .003, r = .44$. This result shows that the division procedure adopted for this study using the MEPT was valid. Third and most importantly, the interaction effect was not significant, and the effect size was small: $F(1, 41) = 0.55, p = .463, r = .115$. That is, repetition influenced listening comprehension to the same degree for both groups.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Dictation Performance by Group and Time*

Group	Time	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Skewness	<i>SES</i>	Kurtosis	<i>SEK</i>
HG (<i>n</i> = 25)	1	18.20	8.01	0.07	0.46	-1.17	0.90
	2	31.44	7.76	-0.29	0.46	-0.42	0.90
LG (<i>n</i> = 18)	1	11.89	5.73	0.81	0.54	0.76	1.04
	2	23.89	8.51	-0.41	0.54	-0.46	1.04

Notes. *SES* = standard error of skewness; *SEK* = standard error of kurtosis.

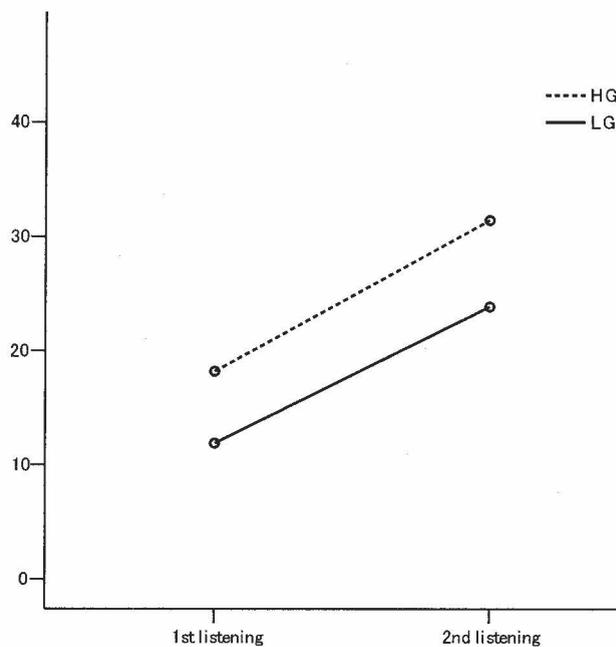


Figure 1. Improvements from the 1st listening to the second listening.

I checked if the passage used in the dictation task was appropriate or difficult for the HG and LG. Most of the participants of both groups ($n = 19$, 76.0% for HG; $n = 11$, 61.1% for LG) did not underline any words. For HG, five (20.0%) underlined one word; and one (4.0%) underlined two words. For LG, seven (38.9%) underlined one word. The exact test showed no statistical difference in the distributions of the participants between the two groups ($p = .301$). Thus, the passage was considered not to be difficult for both groups, and its difficulty level was the same for both groups.

3.8 Discussion

This study provided another piece of empirical evidence for non-interaction-effect of repetition and proficiency level. In other words, if the level of a listening passage is appropriate for L2 learners, repetition may be beneficial for both higher proficiency levels and lower proficiency levels.

The findings suggest that task differences may not explain the mixed results: Even with detailed scoring systems, interaction effects were not observed. Thus, the findings did not give support to Sakai's (2009) suggestion: "If detailed scoring analyses, as discussed above, are necessary to detect the differential effect of repetition for different proficiency levels, it is important to examine the effects of different scoring methods for protocol analysis" (p. 370).

Then, a question arose: What factor(s) may explain the mixed results of the previous studies? It should be noted that both Sakai (2009) and Study 1 in this paper used the listening passages which were appropriate for the participants and within their linguistic knowledge. In other words, both studies pointed out such a condition as "if the level of a listening passage is appropriate for L2 learners." For a fuller discussion of the relationship between repetition and proficiency level, it is necessary to examine if the difficulty level of listening passages may be another possible factor.

4. Study 2

4.1 Research Question

The second study was designed in order to answer the research question: Does the difficulty level of listening passages influence the relationship between repetition and proficiency level?

4.2 Participants

The participants were 18 Japanese university students learning English. All of them were different from those who participated in Study 1. They were divided into HG ($n = 8$) and LG ($n = 10$) on the basis of the scores of the listening section of the CELT (Form A, Harris & Palmer, 1986). The CELT listening form contains 50 items. The results showed that the mean score was 31.44 and the standard deviation was 6.36. The Cronbach alpha was .79. The mean score was used for the division. The mean score and the standard deviation were 36.75 and 4.37 for HG and 27.20 and 4.08 for LG. The difference between the two groups was statistically significant: $t(16) = 4.79, p < .000$.

4.3 Materials

For this study, six listening passages were played. The materials consisted of two passages from each of the three grades (3rd Grade, Pre-2nd Grade, and Pre-1st Grade). The 3rd Grade is the easiest of the three, followed by the Pre-2nd Grade. The Pre-1st Grade is the most difficult. The attached CDs were used (Obunsha, 2004a, 2004b, 2006).

Table 2 shows the information of the six listening passages used for Study 2 (see also Appendix A). The possible maximum score for each grade was 77, 95, and 93 respectively.

Table 2. *Six Listening Passages for Study 2*

STEP Grade	ID	Topic	Voice	Words	Duration	wpm
3rd Grade	A	Mary's Piano Lesson	female	40	19 sec	126
	B	Kate's Violin Lesson	female	37	19 sec	117
Pre-2nd Grade	C	Mary's Lunch Time	male	47	19 sec	148
	D	Nancy's Dream	female	48	20 sec	144
Pre-1st Grade	E	Hedgehogs	female	48	23 sec	125
	F	Passwords	Male	45	19 sec	142

4.4 Procedures

The participants took the listening test of the CELT (Form A) in April. After two months, the experimental tasks were carried out after a two-month practice of dictation.

The participants listened to Passages A, C, E, B, D, and F in this order. For each passage, they were asked to write down everything they understood in English. After the first round, they listened to the six passages for the second time. They were not allowed to take notes while listening. After the dictation task under the repeated condition, they were given scripts of the passages and listened to them. They were asked to underline the words for which they did not come up with the meanings.

4.5 Analysis

In the same way as Study 1, the exact word method was employed for scoring. Again, I did not calculate reliability indices for the same reason as Study 1.

In order to test the interaction effect of repetition and proficiency level, I performed three two-way ANOVAs with time being a within-subjects factor (two levels: the first listening and the second listening)¹ and with proficiency level as a between-subjects factor (two levels: HG and LG) after checking the assumptions for the analysis. Since I performed three ANOVAs, I set the alpha level at .017 with a Bonferroni adjustment (5% divided by the three analyses) in order to avoid Type I error. Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated as effect sizes (Field, 2005, pp. 514-516).

4.6 Results

Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of dictation performance for the three difficulty levels (see also Figure 2). For the 3rd grade passages (A & B) and pre-2nd grade passages (C & D), both groups improved from the first listening to the second listening in the same way;

on the other hand, for the pre-1st grade passages, HG improved more than LG did.

I checked the assumptions of statistical analyses in terms of univariate and multivariate outliers, normality, and skewness and kurtosis. Because these assumptions were confirmed, I went on to performing ANOVAs even though the n -sizes for each group were small.

Table 3. *Descriptive Statistics of Dictation Performance for the Three Difficulty Levels*

Passages	Group	Time	M	SD	Skewness	SES	Kurtosis	SEK
A & B	HG	1	36.88	7.81	-0.71	0.75	-1.28	1.48
		2	53.62	14.31	-1.06	0.75	0.43	1.48
	LG	1	31.20	11.34	-0.29	0.69	-0.91	1.33
		2	49.80	9.28	-0.84	0.69	-0.21	1.33
C & D	HG	1	56.12	18.57	0.54	0.75	-0.29	1.48
		2	71.25	14.48	-0.51	0.75	-1.26	1.48
	LG	1	41.70	10.70	-0.52	0.69	-0.63	1.33
		2	59.30	9.17	-0.88	0.69	0.52	1.33
E & F	HG	1	6.62	4.37	0.73	0.75	-0.23	1.48
		2	13.38	5.55	0.46	0.75	-0.42	1.48
	LG	1	6.80	2.25	-0.28	0.69	-0.73	1.33
		2	9.90	2.96	1.31	0.69	0.75	1.33

Notes. The maximal scores for A & B, C & D, and E & F were 77, 95, and 93 respectively; the n sizes of HG and LG were 8 and 10 respectively; SES = standard error of skewness; SEK = standard error of kurtosis.

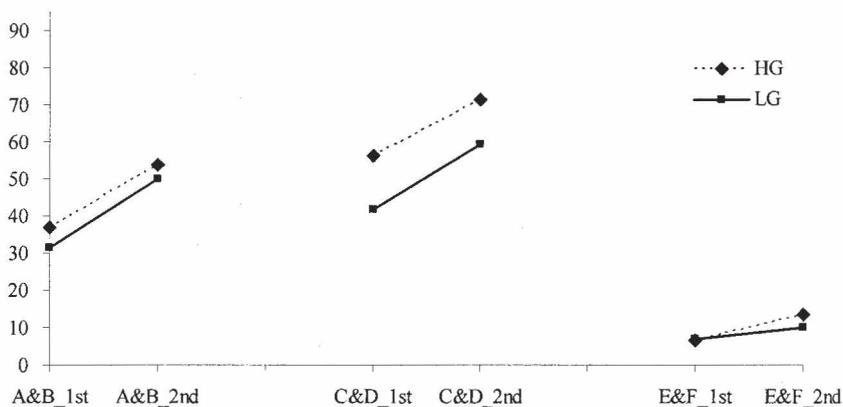


Figure 2. Improvements from the 1st listening to the second listening for the three difficulty levels.

For the passages of 3rd Grade, only the main effect of time was statistically significant: $F(1, 16) = 93.35, p = .000, r = .92$; whereas the main effect of proficiency level and the interaction effect of time and proficiency level were not significant: $F(1, 16) = 0.97, p = .340, r = .24$; and $F(1, 16) = 0.26, p = .620, r = .13$. For the passages of Pre-2nd Grade, similar results were obtained. The main effect of time was significant: $F(1, 16) = 77.14, p = .000, r = .91$, but the main effect of proficiency level and the interaction effect of time and proficiency level were not significant: $F(1, 16) = 4.78, p = .044, r = .48$, and $F(1, 16) = 0.44, p = .516, r = .16$. For the passages of Pre-1st Grade, the main effect of time and the interaction effect of time and proficiency level were significant: $F(1, 16) = 59.27, p = .000, r = .89$, and $F(1, 16) = 8.14, p = .012, r = .58$. The main effect of proficiency level was not significant: $F(1, 16) = 0.93, p = .349, r = .23$.

To sum up, the statistical analyses support the above observation: the interaction effect of repetition and proficiency level was significant only for the passages of the pre-1st grade. In terms of the effect sizes, the interaction effect was large for the passages of the pre-1st grade whereas the interaction effects for the other grades showed small effect sizes, that is, of less than .30 ($r = .13$ and $r = .16$).

Table 4 shows the number of participants who reported unknown words. For example, as with Passages A and B, eight of HG did not underline any words; ten of LG did not underline any words. Table 4 suggests that Passages A, B, C, and D were not so difficult for both HG and LG whereas Passages E and F were difficult for both HG and LG in terms of lexical knowledge.

Table 4. *The Number of Participants Who Reported Unknown Words*

Passage	Proficiency Level	The Number of Unknown Words							
		0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
A	HG	8							
	LG	10							
B	HG	8							
	LG	10							
C	HG	6	2						
	LG	8	2						
D	HG	6	2						
	LG	9	1						
E	HG	0	0	0	3	2	1	2	0
	LG	0	1	2	4	0	1	1	1
F	HG	1	4	3	0				
	LG	2	3	3	2				

4.7 Discussion

According to the second small-scale study, it was found that with the detailed scoring method, an interaction effect of proficiency and repetition was not found for the easier passages (3rd Grade and Pre-2nd Grade), but was observed for the more difficult passage (Pre-1st Grade). The findings lent support for the hypothesis that the difficulty of listening passages may be a mediating factor for the interaction effect of proficiency and repetition. By *mediating factor*, I mean a factor which may influence the relationship between the two variables (here, repetition and proficiency level).

The difficulty levels used in previous studies are examined to see if studies reporting interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level used difficult listening materials for participants. First, Lund (1991), which reported the interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level, used a free written recall task. The descriptive statistics for each condition at a proficiency level were not provided. He stated a grand mean score for listening task: $M = 2.9$ (1st time), and $M = 5.0$ (2nd time). Considering that the total proposition number was 29, the results suggest that the participants understood 10% to 17% of the text. Second, the studies which reported no interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level are as follows. Cervantes and Gainer (1992) used a partial dictation. In their studies, the descriptive statistics were not provided. Further, no information about the difficulty levels of the passages was reported. Jimura (2007) reported no interaction effects as well. He used 10 monologue passages, each of which had two questions (local or global). Thus, the maximum score was 10. The high listening proficiency group's scores were 4.39 for global and 3.97 for local on the first listening and 6.70 for global and 6.52 for local on the second listening. The low listening proficiency group's scores were 2.23 for global and 1.95 for local on the first listening and 3.82 for global and 3.60 for local on the second listening. Although the low listening proficiency group understood 22.3% and 19.5% for the first time, their understanding increased to 38.2% and 36.0% of the total. Sakai (2009) used a free written recall task. The possible maximum score was 28. The HG got 15.00 on the first trial and 20.88 on the second trial whereas the LG got 12.45 on the first trial and 17.45 on the second trial. The results suggest that the participants understood 44.5% to 74.6% of the text. In general, on the basis of the information available from the previous studies, the interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level were reported in the case that the listening passages may have been difficult for the participants (see the low percentages of comprehension for Lund, 1991).

5. Overall Discussion

In this section, the findings of the two studies are discussed from a perspective of listening processing.

Listening comprehension ability has been considered to require sufficient linguistic knowledge and listening processing skills (e.g., Vandergrift, 2006; see also Buck, 2001; Lund, 1991). For example, Vandergrift (2006) stated that:

As a process of comprehension, listening shares many important characteristics with

reading.... Both require receptive language processing, which involves decoding and comprehension. Thus, both processes use two basic knowledge sources, language knowledge and world knowledge ... for purposes of comprehension. Like reading, listening also entails two major processes, top-down and bottom-up, in applying such knowledge to the input during comprehension. (p. 9).

In this quotation, he compared listening to reading and went on to state that a listener utilizes linguistic knowledge as well as world knowledge and executes top-down and bottom-up processes to apply such knowledge for comprehension in real time. In other words, listening processes go on in real time and are “ephemeral” and “cognitively demanding” (p. 9).

From this view of listening processes, it is possible to suppose that repetition may compensate for lack of listening processing skills and may reduce the burden of real-time listening processes. In other words, repeated listening may enable an L2 learner to make use of linguistic knowledge available to him or her. Thus, it is implied that performance on the task of repetitive exposure may increase the possibility of reflecting on linguistic knowledge more than listening processing skills. If the difficulty levels of listening materials are within L2 learners' levels, the differences among proficiency levels may not be large; on the other hand, with difficult listening texts, the performance may reflect the levels of linguistic knowledge which L2 learners can utilize.

6. Conclusion

As implications for future studies, this study suggests that it is necessary to consider the task conditions carefully, depending on the purposes of listening tasks. When the researcher is interested in assessing processing skills, that is, the skills to process auditory input in real time, the assessment task should not include the repetition conditions. In addition, it is important to examine the tasks used in listening research carefully because a variety of conditions such as repetition may influence the performance of the tasks.

This study has several limitations so that generalizations of the findings will need more studies with different conditions. First of all, the sample size for Study 2 was small. Thus, the possibility of type 2 error in the interpretations of the statistical results remains. Second, the passages were not controlled in terms of their topics, length, speed, and voice. In the future, this study needs to be replicated with studies with more participants and carefully controlled listening materials.

Although there are limitations, this study provides some empirical evidence regarding the effects of a task condition (repetition) on L2 listening performance. It is hoped that the findings will be helpful for test designers' decision making and for future research.

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Note

¹I performed three separate two-way ANOVAs with adjustment for controlling Type I error rather than a three-way ANOVA. The main reason was that because the maximal scores for the three difficulty levels of the listening passages were different (77, 95, and 93 respectively), it was not possible to treat these three variables as one dependent variable. For future studies, it is necessary to control the number of idea units in passages so that researchers can examine the interaction effect of proficiency level, time, and difficulty level directly. I appreciate the reviewer's comments on this point.

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Appendix A. Passages Used in Study 2 (Obunsha, 2004a, 2004b, 2006)

Passage A (Jane's Piano Lesson)

Last Monday, Jane had to do many things. After school she had a piano lesson. Then she visited her grandmother in the hospital until eight o'clock. When she got home, it was nine thirty at night. She was very tired.

Passage B (Kate's Violin Lesson)

Kate takes violin lessons every Tuesday after school. Her teacher, Mr. Jones, usually goes to her house for the lessons. But today Mr. Jones asked her to come to his house. Kate will practice for a concert.

Passage C (Mary's Lunch Time = Passage 1 for Study 1)

Mary works as a secretary. She usually has lunch at a noodle shop near her office. But yesterday it was closed, so she went to an Italian restaurant and had some spaghetti. Before she went back to her office, she stopped at a café and had dessert.

Passage D (Nancy's Dream)

When Nancy was a high school student, she wanted to become a singer. But while she was at college, she met a great English teacher, Mr. Porter. He taught her many things, including how to enjoy poetry and write short stories. Now Nancy wants to become a teacher.

Passage E (Hedgehogs)

The British have a great affection for hedgehogs, and it's no wonder. They frequently enter urban backyards and cross streets, giving residents a close-up look at nature. They are easily domesticated and often kept for pets and insect control. Unfortunately, these spiny little balls are also incredibly clumsy.

Passage F (Passwords)

Psychologist Helen Petrie believes the password you choose to open your email also may serve as a window to your personality. Passwords are revealing because they are generated on the spot, meaning people choose something that comes quickly to mind, often something in their subconscious.

Abstract

This article reports on two studies which investigated the effect of repeated exposure in a second language (L2) dictation task on listening comprehension of L2 learners at two different listening proficiency levels. In Study 1, 43 Japanese university students were divided into a high listening proficiency group (HG) and a low listening proficiency group (LG) and were given a full-text dictation task. The task was repeated. Results revealed (a) that repetition improved listening comprehension for both groups, and (b) that no interaction effects between repetition and proficiency level were found. Study 2 examined the influence of text difficulty on the interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level. Eighteen Japanese university students were divided into HG and LG and were required to perform dictation tasks with passages of differing difficulty levels under the repetition condition. Results showed that for the easier passages, the interaction effects of repetition and proficiency level were not found; however, the interaction effects were identified for the more difficult passages. Based on these findings, it was suggested that if the text is within the learners' linguistic ability, repetition improves listening comprehension of L2 learners at different proficiency levels in similar ways and that the difficulty levels of the listening materials may influence the effects of repetition and proficiency level.

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