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Kanji Symbolism

Listening in Action

Project Tokyo Case Study 4

Williamson-Dicken, M., Blackmore, R., Childs, D., Phillips, N., Powles, A., Soper, C. & Stokes, M. (2025)

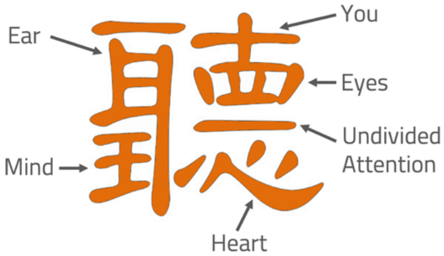
This case study introduces a refined conceptualisation of classroom listening as a family of purposive, analytically separable stances rather than a single capacity.

The taxonomy emerges from Project Tokyo's observations in Japanese schools where teachers routinely name and rehearse specific listening stances. It emerges from discussions with governmental departments and organisations (such as the Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Teacher Training Division and the British Council). Finally, it emerges from contemporary theorising in discourse studies, cognitive psychology and socio-emotional pedagogy.

Treating listening as purposive sharpens learning intentions, clarifies observation criteria and aligns assessment with distinct cognitive, social and normative aims (Rost, 2011; Vandergrift, 2007). Expanded below is an exploration of listening drawn from the conceptual anchor of the kanji script (聴) which attempts to provide an evidence-informed account of each listening stance, situating each in relevant theoretical debates and contemporary empirical threads.

Japanese Kanji Symbolism: A Layered Semiotic Prompt for Pedagogy

The kanji symbol, 聴, functions as a compact semiotic device that richly indexes the multimodal and moral character of careful listening. Its conventional pedagogical parsing draws four readable motifs: ear (耳), eye (目), heart/mind (心/忄) and enclosing strokes that signal unified attention. The kanji uses these symbols as analytic levers for specifying what we mean by "listen" in which can be directly applied to classroom contexts. This section elaborates those elements and connects them to research that justifies treating listening as an integrated stance rather than a checklist of discrete skills.



- Ear (耳): this literal component foregrounds auditory perceptual access. Perceptual accuracy, which includes phoneme discrimination, signal-to-noise separation, prosodic sensitivity, is a prerequisite for higher-order listening (Henshall, 1999; Vandergrift, 2007). Cognitive models emphasise that noisy or degraded input dramatically increases processing load and reduces capacity for inferencing and memory consolidation (Kintsch, 1998).

- Eye (目): the eye component formalises the multimodal nature of situated communication. Gesture, gaze, visual artefacts and environmental context routinely disambiguate spoken input and scaffold coherence (Clark & Brennan, 1991; McNeill, 1992). Multimodal integration reduces ambiguity and supports interlocutors' joint attention and grounding in interactional work (Clark & Brennan, 1991).

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- Heart/Mind (心/忄): this element anchors interpretive, evaluative and socio-affective dimensions such as understanding another's perspective, valuation, empathic resonance and forming a judgement. Theoretical work on socio-emotional learning and dialogic pedagogy positions these capacities as central to purposeful listening, not peripheral add-ons (Rogers & Farson, 1957; Vygotsky, 1978).

- Enclosure / unifying strokes: the additional strokes in 聴 are read metaphorically as directives for coordinated attention. That is listening as a whole-person stance that integrates sensory reception, contextual scanning and inner processing. This visual unity supports the pedagogical claim that effective listening is an organised orientation of resources rather than the sum of independent micro-skills (Spahn & Hadamitzky, 2004).

Semiotically, the contrast between 聴 (attentive, multimodal listening) and 聞 (ordinary hearing, asking/receiving) helps us to define what we mean by listening. In Welsh and in English, the distinction is often confused and sees the words “hear” and “listen” often used interchangeably. This approach can obscure the pedagogical importance of intentional, multimodal attention. Preserving the kanji distinction when translating classroom practice retains analytic precision and helps educators name what specific stance they intend when they ask pupils to “listen.”

Listening to Understand Content and Concepts

Listening to understand is a receptive cognitive stance whose main task is to build clear mental representations of spoken discourse that learners can use for reasoning and transfer. Cognitive models of comprehension (Kintsch, 1998) describe how listeners form situation models by combining propositions, inferences and curricula expectations.

Recent empirical work emphasises the metacognitive supports for this stance: proficient comprehension involves explicit planning, active monitoring during listening and brief post-listening evaluation (Polatcan et al., 2025). Studies connect successful comprehension to a repertoire of strategies, such as asking simple questions and summarising, and linking to prior subject knowledge that reduces the need for heavy inference (Kintsch, 1998). Developmentally, listeners move from grasping surface gist to deeper analytic understanding through graduated exposure to more complex discourse, targeted questioning and chances to apply newly organised knowledge to problems.

Analytically, listening to understand differs from verbatim recall. Evidence of success includes accurate paraphrase, coherent reconstruction of argument sequence, and the ability to use heard frames to reason across problems or to teach others. In bilingual contexts, such as Japanese–English or Welsh–English settings, consolidation is often supported by translanguaging meaning understanding a concept in the receipt language and rendering it in a different target language. For classroom assessment, this stance offers measurable outcomes (paraphrase accuracy, transfer tasks) but requires aligning talk tasks with explicit comprehension aims.

Listening to Remember and Encode

Memory-oriented listening prioritises processes that convert speech into durable, retrievable knowledge. Cognitive theory shows encoding is not automatic; it requires deliberate strategies and is supported by consolidation mechanisms that benefit from a range of retrieval methods (Roediger & Butler, 2011). When listeners adopt an encoding stance they use techniques such as segmentation, labelling, rehearsal and mnemonic linking, and they often use external artefacts (such as notes, diagrams) to scaffold consolidation.

Classroom research confirms that retrieval practice after listening episodes greatly enhances long-term retention and transfer (Roediger & Butler, 2011). This stance is therefore pedagogically important in areas of learning where retention is central, such as vocabulary learning, procedural schemas and thematic facts. It is also analytically separable from immediate comprehension: a learner may grasp a lesson’s gist but still fail to encode it for later use.

Listening to Follow Instructions

Instruction-focused listening mobilises precise sequential and conditional processing to convert spoken directives into accurate action. Linguistic analyses of imperative and procedural discourse highlight the cognitive demands on working memory and temporal sequencing (Clark & Carlson, 1982). In language schools and full immersion settings, practising this stance is especially important because it emphasises understanding commands and retrieving the information needed to act.

Unlike comprehension for conceptual understanding alone, instruction listening is outcome-centred: success is measured by performance fidelity (the exactness and accuracy with which something is copied or reproduced) rather than by internal paraphrase. This matters because

errors can have concrete consequences. Often there is a right or wrong response to an instruction, which makes it important to frame mistakes as low-stakes learning opportunities.

This type of listening often encourages compensatory strategies, such as immediate repetition, checkpointing and use of visual checklists, which offload cognitive load and improve reliability. Research in human factors and instructional design supports multimodal learning (spoken, visual/kinaesthetic and modelling/demonstration) to enhance procedural uptake and reduce error rates. Pedagogically, separating this stance clarifies why some listening tasks require different evidence and different classroom designs than comprehension or critical listening.

Listening to Prepare or Craft a Response

Preparation-listening is an anticipatory stance that integrates comprehension with short-term speech planning. The learner must simultaneously understand incoming discourse and hold salient elements in working memory while composing a context-sensitive contribution. Cognitive load theory explains the challenge: selecting elements for production competes with depth of comprehension and requires strategic filtering and goal-directed attention (Brown & Yule, 1983).

This stance is central to dialogic pedagogy. Empirical classroom work shows that explicit structures (such as roles, wait time and response scaffolds) increase the quality of contributions (Mercer, 2000; Banaruee et al., 2025). Successful preparation-listening is visible when responses directly reference prior talk, extend reasoning, or pose analytically productive questions that move discourse forward.

Listening to Learn Language and Pronunciation

Language-learning listening prioritises perceptual attunement to phonological, prosodic (rhythm, stress and intonation) and syntactic (word order) features that support later production. Theoretical accounts of phonological acquisition emphasise perceptual tuning: repeated exposure and focused discrimination enable learners to form robust phonemic categories and distributional knowledge (Vandergrift, 2007).

Success is measured by increased accuracy, improved pronunciation in production tasks and faster lexical retrieval. Methodologically, teachers can use audio-based decoding tasks and longitudinal fluency measures (for example the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) to develop this stance. Treating language-learning listening separately highlights that language listening is not merely comprehension but an input pathway essential for vocabulary, phonology and oral proficiency.

Listening for Empathising

Empathic listening foregrounds affective resonance and relational interaction: the listener's primary task is to grasp and reflect the speaker's emotional experience rather than to prioritise immediate informational extraction (Rogers & Farson, 1957). Psychological models stress that affective attunement builds trust, helps regulate emotion and creates conditions for learning that depend on relational safety (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

In classrooms, empathic listening is embedded in restorative practice and pastoral dialogue; outcomes include reduced conflict, increased disclosure and improved classroom climate. It relies on sensitivity to paralinguistic cues, narrative content and the speaker's contextual framing. Analytically, empathic listening is cognitive and a method of connecting emotions. It carries ethical dimensions (such as respect, non-judgement and care) that shape the social ecology of learning.

Listening to Collaborate and Co-Construct Meaning

Collaborative listening treats dialogue as joint epistemic work where individual contributions are synthesised into shared understanding. Theoretical work on dialogic education positions listening as co-productive: knowledge is constructed through intersubjective exchange and metadiscursive linking (Mercer, 2000). Practically, collaborative listening involves discussing how a speaker organises their text, engages with their audience and expresses stance. It requires role awareness, reciprocal uptake and explicit moves to revoice and connect peers' ideas. Conceptually, this stance reframes listening as generative: listening actions produce the material that the group transforms into collective knowledge.

Listening to Evaluate and Think Critically

Critical listening mobilises analytical scepticism: the listener judges claims by evidentiary sufficiency, rhetorical structure and source reliability (Kahneman, 2011). It requires explicit evaluative schemes and metacognitive monitoring for bias and incorrect judgements.

Learners who adopt sceptical yet fair dispositions and use evaluative strategies show greater success in interpreting mediated speech and in collective reasoning tasks (Polatcan et al., 2025).

Assessment of critical listening entails asking learners to justify judgements with evidence, to identify logical gaps or rhetorical strategies and to revise positions in light of new data. Conceptually, critical listening serves epistemic aims, collective responsibility and protection against manipulation, while enabling reasoned group participation.

Listening for Aesthetic Appreciation

Aesthetic listening foregrounds form, mood and craft. The stance values timbre, phrasing, metaphor and rhetorical texture, and treats ambiguity as a resource for interpretive richness (Attfield & Oatley, 2016). In curricular areas of learning such as music, literature and drama, aesthetic listening cultivates expressive sensitivity, interpretive vocabulary and a shared language for discussing craft.

Classroom work on aesthetic engagement links repeated exposure and reflective practice to deepened interpretive skill. Beyond the arts, aesthetic listening enhances sensitivity to prosody and nuance that benefits language learning, comprehension and social attunement.

Listening to Attend to Non-Verbal and Environmental Cues

Multimodal listening synthesises auditory input with visual and spatial cues (gesture, facial expression, posture, proxemics and ambient sounds) to build a coherent situational interpretation (McNeill, 1992). This stance is crucial in inclusive classrooms where non-verbal signals often index needs, and in classroom management where non-verbal cues indicate engagement.

Research on multimodal communication shows that listeners who integrate non-verbal channels of information effectively have superior interactional repair strategies and better social comprehension.

Listening to Monitor Understanding and Self-Regulate

Metacognitive listening is an ongoing procedural stance in which listeners appraise comprehension in real time and deploy regulation strategies, such as clarifying questions and summarising, to maintain comprehension quality (Flavell, 1979). Contemporary evidence demonstrates that explicit instruction in planning, monitoring and evaluation reliably improves academic listening outcomes and transfers across contexts (Polatcan et al., 2025). This stance underpins independent learning: learners who monitor and regulate through listening are more adept at adjusting strategies, seeking support and avoiding cumulative misunderstanding.

Listening for Warning Signs and Safety Cues

Vigilance-oriented listening prioritises rapid detection of distress signals, escalation and environmental hazards. The cognitive work involves detection, classification and expedited response. Learners who have experienced significant adverse childhood experiences may be overly focused on this kind of listening, whether consciously or unconsciously. If so, other listening modes are likely to be compromised and will require consistent reassurance and demonstration that the environment is safe and that the individual is protected from harm. Only when safety is established can a learner's full listening potential be realised.

Conclusion

These stances are analytically distinct but empirically interwoven. For example, listening to understand often co-occurs with memory encoding; empathic listening may co-occur with monitoring and metacognitive regulation; collaborative listening depends on preparation-listening and critical evaluation.

The kanji symbol, 聴, remains a useful heuristic precisely because it foregrounds this integration: ear for perceptual acuity, eye for contextual scanning, heart/mind for valuation and the enclosure stroke for unified orientation. In other words, the kanji symbol, 聴, offers a semiotic shorthand that highlights multimodality and moral attention. Operationalising these elements in schools and immersion centres will help design tasks that isolate or combine specific processes. It will help practitioners declare precise learning aims whilst allowing learners to experience and utilise the full range of their listening skills to deepen knowledge, understanding, empathy and skills.

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