Language Contact and Confidence in Second Language Listening Comprehension: A Pilot Study of Advanced[1] Learners of German

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Abstract: *Over the past several decades, listening comprehension has not received a great deal of focus in foreign/second language acquisition (SLA) research compared to other skills and competencies. Although there is growing research on instructional techniques and strategies to enhance those skills in the earlier stages of second language (L2) learning, there is little investigation of text-related factors, as well as individual learner factors, that may contribute to advanced-level listening skills. This paper reports on a pilot study on both textual and individual factors for advanced-level listening comprehension. Twenty-seven advanced learners of L2 German served as participants, along with 10 native speaker controls, for multiple-choice listening items including both short and extended listening texts. In addition, a background survey assessed language-contact factors to look for significant influence on advanced-level listening comprehension.* T *test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) tests show that the nonnative speakers do not differ significantly from the native speaker controls for these tasks, but that confidence in interpreting meaning was significant for certain item types. Correlational analyses point to several language contact factors that indicate both quantity and quality of L2 experience were significant for overall listening comprehension accuracy, as well as for confidence. Based on these preliminary findings, more research is recommended to explore experiential variables that may predict advanced attainment in listening.*

Key words: *adults, German as a second language, learner factors, listening, second language (L2) learning*

Language: *German*

Introduction

Canale and Swain's (1980) description of communicative competence was groundbreaking in its description of second language (L2) competencies beyond mere grammatical accuracy. Discourse, strategic, and sociolinguistic know-how

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were cited as distinct, though interconnected, competencies. As a result, ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines have spelled out clear recommendations for advanced-level abilities in the communicative realm, including the ability to "initiate, sustain and bring to closure a wide variety of communicative tasks" (Buck, Brynes, & Thompson, 1989). All such communicative skills rely not only on lexical, grammatical, topical, and cultural knowledge—their foundation is comprehension.

While it is arguably the cornerstone of interpersonal communication, and several foreign language methods have stressed its significance for overall fluency, listening skills have traditionally been labeled as "passive" or "receptive," even though listening comprehension is an active, complex process—in some ways, independent from other skills (see Hirai, 1999; Lund, 1991; Wong, 2001). In early discussions of communicative competence, little direct attention was paid to listening as a distinct skill set. The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (1989) described advanced learners as able to comprehend standard dialect at a normal rate, and able to glean the main idea and most supporting details for everyday topics. While most current textbooks do emphasize the importance of listening skills, there is still no solid consensus on how to best teach listening. Some have contended that the field of foreign language teaching has viewed listening less as a set of skills and more as "an *activity* to be used in foreign language instruction" (Feyten, 1991, p. 175 [italics added]). Cook, in fact, suggested that listening may not be directly teachable, and that "the best the teacher can do is to devise amusing activities during which the natural listening abilities can be automatically activated" (1991, p. 61). Ultimately, the field may have "placed too much emphasis on speaking, in the hope that the other skill areas will more or less fall in line behind it" (James, 1985, p. 5). As teachers, we may tend toward the assumption that listening develops naturally where the focus is on "comprehensible input" (see Krashen, 1981, 1996). These long-standing uncertainties are now somewhat entrenched, given the lack of solid understanding of how listening skills operate in practice, much less how they develop over the long term.

Research Directions in L2 Comprehension and Listening

Second/foreign language researchers have largely adopted first language (L1) cognitive processing models of "top-down" versus "bottom-up" processing which stress the importance of background knowledge or "schemas" for speech comprehension, and the ways that appropriate knowledge is triggered by textual, auditory, or even visual cues (Battestini & Rolin-Ianziti, 2000; Carrier, 1999; Kellerman, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Rumelhart, 1980). Recently, introspective methods have probed how L2 learners identify word and phrasal boundaries, detect key words and pragmatic nuance, and establish referential and social meanings simultaneously (Goh, 2000; Hasan, 2000; Long, 1990a; O'Malley, Chamot, & Kupper, 1989; Vogely, 1995). Based on the few studies that compare beginning with intermediate learners, it is clear that less-proficient learners rely much more heavily on bottom-up processing (Field, 2004; Osada, 2001; Shohamy & Inbar, 1991) in the absence of greater contextual knowledge typical of native speakers (see Long, 1996). This means that authentic input can be problematic if learners focus their attention indiscriminately on all aspects of a text. Key contextual cues that provide social and pragmatic information may be missed (see Lucy, 1991; Omaggio Hadley, 2001), especially when speed and excessive background noise are involved—features common to authentic (if not classroom) interaction. Moreover, as Shrum and Glisan (2005) have pointed out, listening does not typically allow for multiple passes, such as in written texts that can be reread. This means that short-term memory may be confounded with comprehension abilities. At the same time, spoken texts may have built-in redundancies that

"enable listeners to cope with the fast pace and fading nature of speech and with the limits of memory . . . " (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991, p. 26) (e.g., certain idiomatic and formulaic phrases that confirm the topic and shared background knowledge).

In keeping with this emphasis on immediate speech processing, much of the relevant research views listening as a set of processing strategies which are idiosyncratic for the most part, but may be teachable to some extent. Research within this framework commonly focuses on the following themes:

1. Specific strategies to enhance listening comprehension: Effective listeners appear to self-monitor during listening tasks, drawing inferences based on the input (O'Malley et al., 1989), and those learners who consciously employ strategies while listening may be more successful than those who do not, regardless of general proficiency level. (See Vogely, 1995; cf. Goh, 2002; Vandergrift, 1997, 2002, for evidence of differential strategy use among lower and higher level learners. See Mendelsohn, 1998 for review). As far as techniques and teachable strategies go, evidence suggests that advanced organizers, visual input, and vocabulary brainstorming may result in higher levels of comprehension (see Berne, 1995; Chung & Huang, 1998; Danan, 2004; Kellerman, 1992; Long, 1990b; Merlet & Gaonach, 1995; Ozaki, 2001), and that multimedia and computer formats may be beneficial interfaces for such activities (Gruba, 2004; Hulstijn, 2003).
2. The impact of situational and textual factors: Speech rate, accent, topic familiarity, repetition of text, and sociolinguistic factors such as interlocutor relationships and opportunities for interaction may make a difference for listening comprehension (Carrier, 1999; Garcia & Asencion, 2001; Gass & Varonis, 1994; Goh, 1999; Leeser, 2004; Pica, Doughty & Young, 1986; Pica, Young & Doughty, 1987; Polio & Gass, 1998; Rodrigo, 2004; Tyler, 2001). Text type appears to also affect comprehension. Official/formal language typically includes more complex lexicon and syntax and offers few pauses and repetitions to assist listeners (Shohamy & Inbar, 1991). Dialogues, on the other hand, may include fragmented speech, but often provide confirmations that allow the listener to check comprehension (see also Brown, 1995; Thompson, 1993).
3. The impact of learner characteristics on listening: Memory, gender, age, attitude, motivation, prior knowledge, and general proficiency level may all affect listening comprehension (see Bacon, 1992; Bacon & Finneman, 1990; Feyten, 1991; Harley, 2000; Hasan, 2000; Long, 1990b; Schmidt-Rinehart, 1994; Vandergrift, 2005).

Such studies offer valuable insights into how listening activities can be optimally designed for beginning and intermediate learners. At the same time, there are too few comparisons of learners at various proficiency levels, and too few inquiries about how listening skills develop over the long term. Moreover, it is not clear how increasing experience with the target language affects listening comprehension, much less which aspects of target language experience may be most beneficial for the development of listening skills.

Methodological Challenges

Common sense dictates that proficiency in listening relies on many factors, including background knowledge, intelligence, metacognitive strategies, topic familiarity, and awareness of contextual information (e.g., pragmatic competence). We know from second language acquisition (SLA) research that a variety of factors predict long term syntactic, morphological, and phonological attainment (e.g., age of onset, motivation, instruction vs. immersion experience, and so forth—see Dörnyei & Skehan,

2003; Doughty, 2003; Hyltenstam & Abrahamsson, 2003, for current reviews). A similar understanding of the factors that contribute to advanced listening could provide insights on how to assess listening at various stages of L2 learning, and how to possibly intervene in the classroom to optimize those factors under our control. Rubin (1994) underscored the need for more hard data in this realm, and more stringency in methodological approaches overall.

One particular challenge for researchers and evaluators who wish to assess listening comprehension is the stimuli, or text, itself. Listening in the real world is not limited to one type of input; a range of text types representing different styles and registers is therefore needed to evaluate the listening skill. Long (1990a) has noted that choosing appropriate texts is a subjective endeavor at best, given that no standard text type exists (interviews, spontaneous speech, news broadcasts, and academic texts have all been used). Other textual concerns include: cleanliness of speech samples (i.e., whether they are marked by background noise, intentional or unintentional); speed; topic familiarity; and length of the actual excerpts (3 minutes is generally considered a rough limit to ensure that memory and attention to detail do not suffer).

Given these concerns, any instrument should be considered experimental and preliminary at this stage of the research. A standard measure is still needed to test listening comprehension across proficiency levels[2] and it should represent various text types. Similarly, response types should be more complex, testing for both global and detailed comprehension (as in Shohamy & Inbar, 1991). Finally, a broad exploration of individual factors (also across proficiency levels) is needed if we hope to get a clear picture of how the relative importance of such factors shifts over time (i.e., in response to increasing L2 experience). As to actually improving listening skill, too few studies are experimental in nature (i.e., testing a specific treatment to enhance the development of listening comprehension). Considering the varied methods employed and the concerns mentioned here, more replication is needed to build a solid understanding of the operative influences on advanced listening comprehension.

Current Study

Based on the some of the research gaps mentioned above, the current pilot investigation focuses on two main areas in listening comprehension: (a) the role of text type/length on listening comprehension; and (b) the role of experiential factors that could affect long-term attainment in listening comprehension. In accordance with these goals, the author selected authentic text types of different lengths and complexity levels to examine how these textual differences might impact listening comprehension, and explored a number of learner variables to examine their potential impact as well. The texts chosen were produced by native speakers for native speakers, replicated in textbooks for advanced German learners.[3] In addition, a background survey was designed to collect information on language contact factors, in terms of access to native speakers while immersed in a German-speaking country, time spent on target language activities, degree of formality in target language use environments, and modes of target language use (speaking vs. reading/writing). Two additional aspects of task performance were included in the instrument design to explore their potential impact: confidence in listening comprehension across tasks, and global versus detailed levels of comprehension for the longer items.

In sum, the primary purposes of this pilot investigation were to determine how advanced learners compare to native speakers in listening comprehension for various text types, and whether specific aspects of their language contact were relevant to performance on these comprehension tasks. The research questions that guided the design of this instrument were as follows:

1. Do advanced learners differ significantly from native speakers in terms of listen-

ing comprehension accuracy for various text types?
2. Do items of a conversational nature, even if considerably longer, result in more accurate comprehension than shorter, more complex items?
3. Are differences in confidence apparent between advanced learners and native speakers for the same listening tasks?
4. Is listening comprehension significantly correlated with any language contact factors for these learners?

Participants

Twenty-seven advanced learners of L2 German (11 males, 16 females) from two universities participated in the study—one in the Mid-Atlantic region and one in the Southwest region of the United States All nonnative participants were instructed learners, most also taught German at their universities and enjoyed a range of target language in-country experience as well. They thus fit the desired profile of participants for the research questions stated: advanced learners with varied and extensive experience in the target language. Ten native speakers (3 male; 7 female) served as controls for all of the listening tasks. Three additional (nonparticipant) native speakers (2 female, 1 male) recorded the spoken texts for the listening stimuli. All participants were enrolled full-time in German programs at the two institutions of higher learning, and therefore were considered of similar educational background. The age of the participants ranged from 17 to 41 for the nonnative speakers, and from 21 to 54 for the native speaker controls. The mean for age of first exposure to German was 14 years for the nonnative speakers.

Instrument Design and Procedure

Based on the research reviewed briefly above, a range of text type and length was deemed important, and therefore the stimuli included spoken language of both formal and informal types—for example, spoken language which is commonly found in news reports and official announcements (short items), and less formal spoken text, such as in conversations and interviews (long items) (see Shohamy & Inbar, 1991 for similar text choices).[4] Listening items were selected for their potential interest to adults in the age range of these participants, with themes ranging from cultural differences between America and Germany to issues of education and child-rearing trends. Native speakers recorded all spoken text items to ensure normal tempo and authenticity in pronunciation.[5] Texts were arranged in the following order:

1. Eight short texts representing official spoken language (news headlines and excerpts, and official announcements). These items ranged from two to four sentences in length and could be characterized as syntactically complex (i.e., representative of formal spoken language).
2. Four long texts, 2 to 3 minutes total (in line with the recommended duration according to the discussion above), all conversational in nature. These texts were judged by the researcher to be accessible based on the interlocutors and situation, as well as the topics involved; three out of four were based on conversations between young people on personal and cultural topics and the final text was an interview with a child psychologist concerning childrearing trends. In line with Research Question 2 (above), it was hypothesized that these longer items would result in more accurate comprehension (in spite of their length, because the syntax of these longer texts was simpler than that of the short items and because confirmations and feedback typical of interaction were inherent in the text type (see previous discussion).

Participants completed all tasks in isolation in a quiet room, listening to the eight short items first, followed by the four long items. Each listening item was followed by a prompt to select an appropriate summary of the passage meaning from three (multiple-choice) possibilities.[6] For the entire listen-

ing task set, the question list was arranged with a blank page inserted between each item; participants were instructed to turn the page between listening segments so that no visual stimuli and no prereading of the question was possible. This was to ensure no prior awareness of the upcoming text. After hearing the speech segment with only a blank page in view, participants then had 60 seconds of silence (queued on the tape) for reading and responding to the question. They were not allowed to rewind and listen again, but could pause the tape if they needed more time to answer the question. The longer items each had two questions: one for global or "main idea" comprehension, and one for detailed comprehension (see Shohamy & Inbar, 1991 for comparable design). For each item, participants were asked to report whether they felt confident in their answer selection (a binary yes/no) (see Appendix A for item and response sheet sample). All items were weighted equally, and frequencies of correct responses, as well as confidence, were tallied in order to complete the group comparisons (see Results section).

Following all listening tasks, participants filled out a questionnaire detailing their German language learning experiences, specifically: total amount of instruction in German, contexts for studying and for using German, both in-country and in the United States, non-classroom contact with German currently, in terms of hours spent weekly engaged in German-contact activities as well as specific contexts and modes of that contact, etc. (see Appendix B). Scalar and open-ended formats were combined where possible to encourage elaboration in responses. All data were then recorded as continuous, categorical, or ordinal response types for purposes of the subsequent analyses.[7]

Results

According to results from the questionnaire, the nonnative speaking participants' experience with German ranged from formal to informal contexts, and they reported great variation in the amount of time spent currently engaging in German language activities beyond the classroom. Table 1 outlines the specifics of their in-country experience in terms of length of residence in a German-speaking country (measured as months/years), and total years spent studying German formally.

As Table 1 shows, these learners have extensive classroom and non-classroom L2 experience, with a mean of nearly two years spent abroad, and nearly 10 years of formal instruction in German. In order to understand more about the quality of that experience, the survey also asked for details regarding language contact while abroad (access to native speakers and contexts for target language contact), time spent on non-classroom target language activities *currently,* as well as contexts for that target language contact beyond the classroom. Table 2 shows the percentages reported for these language contact variables.

As is evident in Table 2, the great majority of these learners were engaged in both personal and professional target language environments while abroad, and interacted primarily with native speakers during that time. This sample of learners reports being highly engaged in target language activities beyond the classroom currently, with the majority spending at least two hours each week in target language activities, with nearly half at four hours or

TABLE 1

Language Learning Experience

	Range	*Mean*	*Min/ Max*	*SD*
Length of Residence	10	2.0	0/10	2.1
Years TL Instruction	17	9.4	2/19	4.4

Note. TL = target language
N = 27; nonnative speakers only

TABLE 2

Language Contact Profile

Primary Language Contact Realms While Abroad	% Respondents
Primary target language interlocutors—NS	**61%**
Primary target language interlocutors—both NS and NNS	32%
Work/school target language environments only	27%
Combination of work/school and personal/home environments	**69%**
Current Language Contact Time Beyond the Classroom	
No contact time spent on TL outside of classroom (0 hours per week)	14%
1–2 hours of contact time on TL outside of classroom (per week)	14%
2–4 hours of contact time on TL outside of classroom (per week)	14%
More than 4 hours contact time on TL outside of classroom (per week)	**43%**
Current Language Contact Opportunities Beyond the Classroom	
Informal/personal interaction	**64%**
Email or TV watching	11%
Work or school-related contact only	**0%**
Both informal and formal (work/school) contexts for TL contact	**39%**

N = 27; nonnative speakers only

Note. TL = target language; NS = native speakers; NNS = nonnative speakers.

more. In terms of mode and formality, most of this engagement is interactive in nature, and many enjoy various combinations of formal–informal and passive–interactive target language contact. It is precisely these details of the quality of contact that are lacking in simple measures like *length of residence or length of instruction,* so common to many studies on advanced learners (see Moyer, 2004). (This point will be further developed in the Discussion section.)

Performance Data

The first and second research questions—whether advanced learners would perform similarly to native speaker controls, and whether any potential differences would be evident across text length/type—was addressed by comparing listening task responses between nonnative and native speakers. Means for accuracy in responses were calculated for all items, and *t* tests were run to check for significant group differences. No such differences were found to be significant, neither for short versus long items, nor for global versus detailed comprehension in the conversational texts. The results are shown in Table 3 and depicted in Figure 1 graphically (*df* = 35 for all computations).

The fact that differences in text length did not play a role in the accuracy of listening comprehension for this sample of learners was an unexpected result, as was the lack of impressive strength for global versus detailed comprehension questions for the longer, conversational items. It is possible that the texts themselves were not sufficiently difficult to distinguish native speakers from these advanced nonnatives. One way to investigate the potential differential effects of length versus complexity in the future would be to include a crosswise design, such that long and short items each contained both formal and informal speech. In this way, some differentiation between length and formality might become apparent.

To avoid the possibility of a Type I or Type II error when too many *t* tests are employed (i.e., either not finding sig-

nificance where it does indeed exist, or finding significance where none exists), a MANOVA was run, partialling out age at first exposure as a potentially confounding factor (see Table 6 for significance of this factor), with means on short and long tasks, as well as means for detailed and global response types, as the multiple dependent variables. Again, this multivariate procedure produced no significant findings, thus, adjusting the observed significance level for the number of comparisons made is not necessary. (A Bonferroni inequality test would have been used if the groups numbered greater than 2). Table 4 reports on those findings.

The third research question concerns the degree to which participants felt confident in their responses, as measured by a binary yes/no response type for each item. Here, the group differences are indeed significant, as Table 5 shows, but only for short items. The results are depicted visually in Figures 2 and 3 (*df* = 35 for all figures).

These results show that native speakers are significantly more confident in their responses (Figure 2), and it is clear that the short items make the difference for this result (Figure 3). Thus, some kind of effect for task length/type is evident for confidence, though not for actual performance. Perhaps the lack of context for the short items is more difficult, particularly for nonnative speakers who may tend toward bottom-up processing; there are few extraneous clues to assist with comprehension in these kinds of items, and therefore any gaps in lexical and/or grammatical abilities could be more pronounced. Although non-

FIGURE 1

Comparing Listening Comprehension for All Tasks

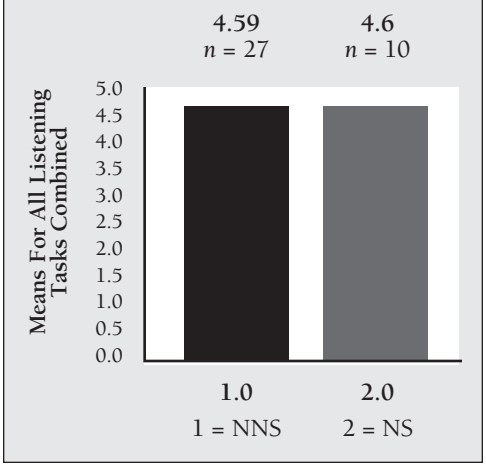


TABLE 3

***T* Test Group Comparisons for Task Type and Response Type**

	NNS Mean	NS Mean	*SE* NNS/NS	*SE* of Mean NNS/NS	*SE* of Diff.	*F* value	*t* value	*p* value
Short items	1.3	1.5	.59/.55	.11/.17	.22	1.4	.24	.22
Long items	2.2	2.2	.52/.42	.1/.13	.18	.63	.43	.9
Global comprehension	2.26	2.4	.76/.51	.15/.16	.26	2.3	-.536	.14
Detailed comprehension	2.18	2.0	.68/.67	.13/.21	.25/.24	.21	.74	.47
Total for all items	4.6	4.6	.77/.81	.15/.26	.29/.29	.38	-.026	.54

(*N* = 37; 27 nonnative speakers and 10 native speakers)*

Note. NS = native speakers; NNS = nonnative speakers.

**F values are from a test of equality of variance in the scores of native speakers and nonnative speakers groups for each item type. No F values showed significance.*

TABLE 4

Multiple Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) for All Item Types

Item Type	Mean	*SD*	*SE* of Mean	Min.	Max.
Long Items					
NNS	2.22	.53	.10	1.0	3.0
NS	2.20	.42	.13	1.5	2.5
Total	2.22	.49	.08	1.0	3.0
Short Items					
NNS	1.3	.59	.11	.5	2.5
NS	1.5	.55	.17	.5	2.5
Total	1.4	.59	.09	.5	2.5
All items combined					
NNS	4.59	.77	.15	2.0	6.0
NS	4.60	.81	.26	3.5	5.5
Total	4.59	.77	.13	2.0	6.0

Item Type	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Long Items					
Between groups	.004	1	.004	.014	.9
Within groups	8.77	35	.25		
Total	8.77	36			
Short items					
Between groups	.54	1	.54	1.6	.22
Within groups	11.9	35	.34		
Total	12.4	36			
All Items combined					
Between groups	0.0	1	0.0	.001	.98
Within groups	21.4	35	.61		
Total	21.4	36			

Item Type	Mean	*SD*	*SE* of Mean	Min.	Max.
Global response items					
NNS	2.26	.76	.15	1.0	3.0
NS	2.40	.52	.16	2.0	3.0
Total	2.30	.70	.12	1.0	3.0
Detailed response items					
NNS	2.2	.68	.13	0.0	3.0
NS	2.0	.67	.21	1.0	3.0
Total	2.1	.67	.11	0.0	3.0

Item Type	Sum of Squares	*df*	Mean Square	*F*	Sig
Global response items					
Between groups	.15	1	.15	.29	.9
Within groups	17.6	35	.5		
Total	17.7	36			
Detailed response items					
Between groups	.25	1	.25	.55	.47
Within groups	16.1	35	.46		
Total	16.3	36			

(*N* = 37) *Note. NS = native speakers; NNS = nonnative speakers.*

FIGURE 2

Comparing Confidence Means for All Tasks

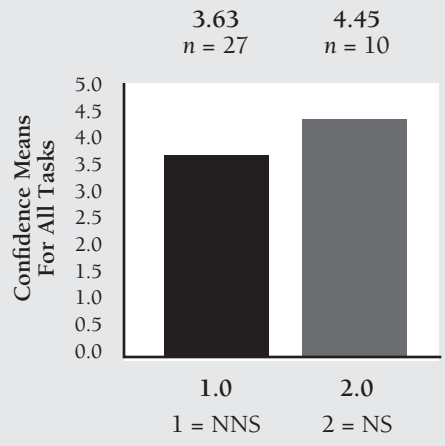
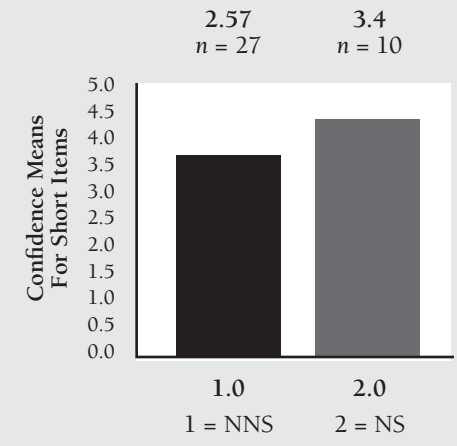


FIGURE 3

Comparing Confidence Means for Short Items



native speakers do perform comparably to native speakers across all tasks, their self-perception of accuracy is nowhere nearly as strong.

To test the hypothesis that there may be a relationship between the extent and quality of language contact and confidence in comprehension accuracy, the researcher computed correlations between the measures of language contact and response confidence.[8] Table 6 shows that extent of target language contact, and the nature and mode of that contact, are all significantly correlated with confidence frequencies for both short and long items and for both item types combined.

Table 6 reveals the following important correlations between language contact and confidence for this group of learners:

1. Confidence for short items: Age at first exposure shows a negative correlation with confidence; thus, the later one begins learning the target language, the less confidence is reported for short, decontextualized items.
2. Confidence for long items: Here, length of residence in a German-speaking country and weekly hours spent

TABLE 5

***T* Test Group Comparisons for Confidence in Comprehension Tasks**

	NNS Mean	NS Mean	*SD* NNS/NS	*SE* of Mean NNS/NS	*SE* of Diff.	*F* value	*t* value	*p* value
Confidence for short items	5.2	7.0	1.5/1.3	.29/.42	.55	.25	-3.3	**.002**
Confidence for long items	2.07	1.9	.82/1.0	.16/.31	.32/.35	.09	.54	.60
Total confidence for all items	3.6	4.5	.98/.98	.19/.31	.36/.36	.04	-.26	**.03**

(*N* = 37)

Note. NS = native speakers; NNS = nonnative speakers.

TABLE 6

Correlations of Language Contact Factors and Confidence

Confidence Per Item Type	Language Contact Factor	*r* value	*p* value
1. Short items	Age at first exposure to German	-.357	**.03**
2. Long items	Length of residence	.40	**.04**
	Weekly hours in TL activities beyond classroom	-.381	**.05**
	Informal/personal contact beyond classroom	-.44	**.04**
Total confidence mean for all tasks/item types	Informal/personal contact beyond classroom	-.47	**.03**

(*N* = 27; nonnative speakers only)

engaged in target language activities beyond the classroom appear to have some impact on listening comprehension. Thus, overall amount of contact (past and current) as a measure of target language engagement is significantly related to self-perception of comprehension abilities.

3. Contact opportunities beyond the classroom: When totals for response confidence for both short and long items are computed and tested for correlations with language contact factors, the most significant finding is for the informal/personal quality of language contact beyond the classroom (see Appendix B, item 9). This speaks to quality of contact, and complements the finding for quantity (#2 above). Supporting this interpretation, a marginally significant finding for multiple contexts for target language contact beyond the classroom was also apparent, at $r = -.39$; $p = .08$.

The fourth and final research question concerns the potential impact of learner background factors on listening comprehension per se. Here, the findings are far less widespread than expected, yet there are similar patterns to those already cited above. Table 7 lists the significant findings for relationships between language contact variables and listening comprehension task performance.

Although very few variables are significantly related to listening comprehension for these learners according to these statistical analyses, those significant findings that do appear support the idea that both quantity of contact (length of residence, age of onset), as well as quality of contact (primary use of German among native speakers while abroad), make the difference for advanced performance:

1. Age and performance: Here, the finding that current age was significantly related to performance on the short items was something of a surprise; the older the participant, the higher the score. Of course, this finding could point to an indirect effect; age could be confounded with quantity of contact (i.e., opportunities to accumulate target language experience in various formal and informal contexts). Like the finding for gender and detailed comprehension questions (also Table 6), no easy explanation for this result is obvious, and the age construct should possibly be tested further before any interpretations are attempted (see Bacon, 1992 for gender and strategy use during listening tasks; cf. Feyten, 1991).
2. Length of residence and performance:

TABLE 7

Correlations of Language Contact Factors to Listening Comprehension

Listening Comprehension Accuracy Per Item	Language Contact Factor	*r* value	*p* value	*N*
1. Short items	Age (current)	.38	.03	34
	Length of residence	.40	.03	27
2. Detailed comprehension	Primary Language-Contact Source = native speakers	.39	.05	27
	Gender	.33	.05	37

(*N* = 27; nonnative speakers only)

This finding is not surprising, given the widespread significance of length of residence in many studies on long-term attainment in a second/foreign language. Still, such a result suggests the need for further exploration of what length of residence means in terms of quality of contact. For example, Moyer (2004) examined length of residence as it correlates significantly with frequency of spoken interaction in the target language, intention to reside permanently in-country, classroom target language instruction and multiple types of formal and informal feedback on linguistic and phonological accuracy, sense of nativeness, and motivation/orientation toward the target language. In essence, length of residence alone tells us nothing about the nature of contact between the acquirer of a target language and the target language community itself. For the purposes of this study, it can at least be interpreted as a (simplistic) measure of quantity of contact abroad, and suggests that overall duration of target language contact is also important for listening skills, as it is for so many other L2 competencies.

3. Contact with native speakers and performance: This finding is arguably one of the more interesting results from the analysis, since the importance of authenticity in language input and practice is something most current teaching methods emphasize, but is rarely accounted for in empirical work on second/foreign language acquisition. One problem is that merely residing in-country, and even taking classes in that country while abroad, gives little indication of the source of one's L2 practice and input. Here, we see that the addition of this question in the survey rounds out our view of how length of residence can be understood in real terms; it is significantly correlated to contact with native speakers (r = .39; p < .05). More will be said about this in the following section.

Discussion

As stated, the primary purpose of this pilot study was to explore whether language contact factors were significantly related to advanced-level listening performance. In terms of Research Question 1, nonnative speakers and native speaker controls did not significantly differ on these tasks. Analyses on individual tasks similarly pointed to no significant differences between groups. Thus, Research Question 2 was also answered negatively for this preliminary study. These results may be due to the nature of the instrument itself, meaning that more items per task type could result in a different outcome, or results could be due to the fact that these learners were high level and had considerable in-country experience in addition to formal instruc-

tion. We can assume that listening skills were already well-developed at this point due to their extensive background in the target language and the test items may not have been sufficiently difficult.

As for Research Question 3, these groups did differ significantly in response-confidence levels during certain tasks, namely, the short items appear to be particularly challenging for the learners' self-perceptions of response accuracy. Perhaps shorter is not necessarily better; longer texts allow the listener to establish and confirm contextual knowledge (see Rubin, 1994, for a review of relevant studies). This could be why the longer items were no more difficult for these learners in reality, yet why their confidence is so much lower for the shorter items.

Research Question 4 arguably led to the most interesting results, with certain aspects of listening performance correlating significantly with several language contact variables. These relationships suggest that a combination of both amount and type, or quantity and quality of L2 contact, is key to advanced abilities in language comprehension. Given the varied language contact experience reported by these learners, it is clear that access to native speakers, contexts for target language use (especially multiple sources of contact), time spent on target language activities beyond formal instruction, and mode and formality of target language use are all significantly related to listening comprehension and/or confidence in listening comprehension when the language used is high level (i.e., relatively complex). Moreover, more is better than less; greater length of residence and more time spent on target language activities outside of the classroom are highly significant for performance, as well as for confidence (see Tables 5 and 6).

The most obvious interpretation of these results, though preliminary at this point, is that a range of contact opportunities is most beneficial for L2 skills development. Here, multiple opportunities for target language contact were marginally significant when tested as a unique measure (see Results section). To extend this interpretation to other realms, we can find support for the importance of language contact in Moyer's 2005 study on syntactic complexity in L2 German across modes. In that study, classroom experience was most significant for writing skills, while multiple contexts for L2 interaction had the greatest impact on spoken fluency (see also Moyer, 2004, for effects on phonology in L2 German).[9] Moyer's interpretation of these collective findings is that the richness of one's language experience may predict the depth of one's engagement in L2, something that impacts not only linguistic attainment, but psychological and social orientation to the target language as well.

Finally, the confidence measure here is a stronger dividing point between nonnative speakers and native speakers than is actual performance, with nonnative speakers significantly less confident on the shorter items. One obvious reason may be that the language on these items was academic, official, or media-type language—arguably more complex than the language used in less formal, more personal interactive communication. As pointed out earlier, the short items do not allow for the establishment of a clear context for interpretation. Nonnative speakers may rely more heavily on bottom-up processing, meaning that lexical and morphosyntactic fluency are their most critical resources. If these are not on par with the native speakers (who are the intended audience for such texts), confidence in comprehension may suffer (if not comprehension itself, at least for less advanced learners).

Confidence deserves much greater attention in the SLA literature in general—it is poorly understood as a construct, and has received little empirical validation up to now. How a learner actually gains confidence in L2 in general is similarly uncharted territory researchwise, but the analyses here indicate that long-term residence in country, and multiple sources (formal and informal) for L2 use over time, as well as

actual time spent on task, are all important to its development.

Limitations of the Study

In terms of instrument design, this pilot study targeted listening across text types, but did not vary response types. In other words, it did not include cloze or open-ended formats that could have pointed to greater differences between native speakers and nonnative speaker performance. It also did not include cross-modal stimuli (e.g., incorporating visuals or advance organizers often used to assist beginner and intermediate learners); that was not the aim, as stated. One related consideration of interest and potential relevance here is the issue of text-type familiarity—a consideration that goes beyond topic familiarity, raised by Shohamy and Inbar (1991) as deserving careful consideration in the future (see Leeser, 2004).

As noted, this study did not have a great number of items per text length/type, which could have affected results in addition to reliability. Replication as well as more test items per text type and/or a crosswise design, could give a clearer indication of the potential impact of text type on comprehension for advanced learners (see earlier discussion).

Because of the paucity of research on advanced learners in general in SLA research, especially for listening comprehension, they were targeted in this pilot investigation. The goal was to consider their performance, but not in isolation from the background experience that they bring to bear for such processing tasks. To this end, advanced learners are ideal for exploring the importance of individual factors; they typically bring layers of language contact experience, not to mention complex psychological orientations to the task. At the same time, by excluding beginning and intermediate learners from this investigation, no conclusions may be drawn here about how such background factors influence performance across various proficiency levels.

Suggestions for Future Research

Without a doubt, there is far too little investigation of listening development, which would optimally include longitudinal methods. The nature of the processes involved makes this both difficult and unlikely at this stage. For now, repeated measures of listening performance could be collected for the same group of learners over time, while cross-sectional designs with increasingly difficult items for various proficiency levels would serve as useful sources of comparative data. At this point in listening research, one-time measures (such as those presented here) are most common, and from them we must piece together the evidence from a variety of approaches—a difficult task, and one that does not necessarily lead to unitary conclusions.

One type of instrument that shows promise for getting at some of the relevant, unobservable constructs is the introspective report (though its weaknesses are also cause for caution). In terms of online processing, such reports could provide insights into how learners negotiate probable meanings to ultimately arrive at their final interpretation of an utterance, and how they determine appropriate responses based on those decisions (see Vandergrift, 2005). For questions of long-term development, learners could reflect on situations or aspects of L2 experience (such as close interactive contact with native speakers) that have been great resources for listening skill development. For the confidence construct in particular, introspective reports could reveal why some learners perceive their abilities in certain ways, and why they do, or do not, seek out opportunities for language contact in certain environments (Buck, 1991; see Hyland, 2004, for recent findings).

Finally, more correlational research is needed in general, including tests of nonlinguistic and contextual factors along with individual learner variables like those investigated here. More complex statistical tests of their relative influence (e.g., multiple regression) are also needed to

determine those factors most influential for developing advanced-level abilities. This has potential classroom application as well. It is possible that, as teachers, we can manipulate some of the most influential factors through instruction, for example, by practicing listening skills with multiple text types and lengths, with and without visual stimuli, and by encouraging more interactive experience beyond the classroom. Such insights could go a long way toward developing a purposeful and principled approach to teaching listening skills.

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Notes

1. For the purposes of this study, "advanced level" is based on the current status of the participants, all of whom were graduate students or senior undergraduates majoring in German at their respective institutions, not on a specific proficiency test. No proficiency test was deemed necessary since a strict level of achievement was not sought for the research questions guiding this investigation. The primary stipulation was that nonnative participants have varied and extensive experience with the target language and be motivated to attain to a high level, as presumed by their status in the language programs they were enrolled in (see Participant section under Current Study).
2. The Defense Language Institute has such a test, based on multiple-choice items, for levels 0+ to 4 on the ILR scale.
3. The sources for these spoken language items were: (a) Zimmer-Loew, H., & Moss A. (Eds.) (1993). *Der Spiegel: Aktuelle Themen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland.* Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., a compilation of original magazine articles from *Der Spiegel* with materials and activities didacticized for advanced learners. The text chosen from this source was an interview with a child psychologist (see Appendix A for sample); (b) Rankin, J., & Wells, L. (2001). *Handbuch zur deutschen Grammatik, 3rd ed.*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., for short items based on German news headlines and official announcements, such as those commonly heard in a train station or on radio; (c) Moser, B., Young, D., & Wolf, D. (1997). *Schemata: Lesestrategien.* Fort Worth, TX: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, for excerpts of actual conversations between high school (Gymnasium) students in Germany who were interviewed in person on behalf of the textbook authors.
4. The short items were chosen both for their thematic relevance and interest to the participants, but also for their syntactic complexity. Otherwise they would not be challenging enough to differentiate native from advanced nonnative abilities. The longer items were not intended to be as complex syntactically as the short items, as this could have resulted in additional problems with short-term memory and general processing load. See Rubin, 1994, for a review of studies that have modified morphological and syntactic features to be more level-appropriate to the listeners tested; see also Ellis & He, 1999, for a study on "premodified" and interactionally modified input as these task differences result in differences in comprehension and subsequent lexical acquisition.

5. The native speakers who recorded the texts did not participate in the study itself.
6. Because this is a pilot study, reliability can only be verified once the instrument is replicated for other sample populations, however, the design included two features common to comparable research on listening comprehension (a) a combination of text types and lengths; (b) multiple-choice items and global versus detailed response types. To test for inter-item reliability for this instrument, a reliability coefficient test was run, and an alpha of .88 was reported for the short items, and an alpha of .71 for the long items. Because the response items were all 'correct' in some sense, (i.e., they involved interpretation rather than hard-and-fast truth, so to speak), a Kappa interrater reliability test verified which response was considered "accurate" for each multiple-choice item, as judged by 3 native speakers (Kappa coefficient for all items combined = .61, *Sig* .02). All of these tests therefore confirmed a solid level of reliability. At the same time, the length of the instrument overall could have affected those results. In future investigations, more items of each type should be included to enhance internal reliability.
7. SPSS 11.0 for Macintosh was used to perform all statistical analyses.
8. Pearson's *r* was computed for interval variables and Kendall's tau for ordinal/categorical variables.
9. One interesting thing of note is that length of instruction, or overall years of formal classroom experience in German, held no impressive correlations with any of the tasks, nor with any of the contact variables measured here. It is not terribly surprising that instructional experience does not correlate with this listening measure—at least not directly—since the tasks were focused on spoken text with no visual stimuli; learners had to comprehend and interpret meaning quickly and without repetition of any of the stimuli—conditions that are not typical of foreign language classroom activities.

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Appendix A

Sample Listening Item and Response Sheet

Long-Item Sample*

Interviewer:
Frau Miller, sind für die positive oder negative Entwicklung eines Kindes oder Jugendlichen nur die Eltern verantwortlich?
[Frau Mill, are parents solely responsible for the positive or negative development of a child or young person?]

Frau Miller:
Ja, sie haben mit dem Zeugungsakt die Verantwortung für das Leben übernommen, und wenn sie das wahrnehmen, wird ihr Kind ebenfalls zum verantwortungsvollen Erwachsensen, der seine Kinder achtet.
[Yes, starting with the act of conception they have taken on the responsibility for that life, and if they take that seriously, then the child will also develop into a responsible adult who cares for his own children.]

Interviewer:
Aber es gibt doch auch andere Faktoren, die eine Rolle in der Kindheit spielen: soziale Herkunft, Behandlung in der Schule, die Reaktionen der Gesellschaft…
[But surely there are other factors that come into play in childhood: social disposition, treatment at school, reactions from society…]

Frau Miller:
Selbstverständlich. Aber ein Kind, das in der ersten Lebenszeit Liebe und Achtung erfahren durfte, wird sich später viel besser gegen Übergriffe seitens des Lehrers, des Vorgesetzten, des Partners wehren können, als ein Kind, das schon zu Hause lernen musste, dass es nicht widersprechen darf.
[Of course, but a child who is allowed to experience love and caring during his early life will better withstand infringements from teachers, superiors, and partners later on than will a child who is never allowed to disobey or question.]

Interviewer:
Hat sich der Erziehungsstil der jüngeren Generation nicht schon erheblich gewandelt?
[Hasn't the child-rearing style of the younger generation already changed considerably though?]

Frau Miller:
Sicher, das zeigt, dass es eben sinnvoll und nötig ist, die Aufklärungsarbeit fortzusetzen. Laut Umfrage der Zeitschrift Eltern, 1998, haben allerdings fast zwei Drittel der Eltern zugegeben selber einmal oder mehrmals geschlagen zu haben.
[Surely, and that proves that it is all the more sensible and necessary to carry on this kind of awareness-building. According to a survey in *Parents, 1998*, nearly two thirds of parents say they have struck their children a few times, or many times.]

Interviewer:
Manche Eltern wissen, dass sie ihre Kinder nicht schlagen sollten, tun es aber dennoch aus Hilfslosigkeit und Verzweiflung. Kann denn eine Therapie den Eltern helfen ihre Erziehungsfehler zu korrigieren?
[Some parents know that they should not hit their children, but do it anyway out of helplessness and confusion. Can therapy help these parents to correct these kinds of child-rearing mistakes?]

Frau Miller:
Das Ziel einer Therapie ist meines Erachtens die Auflösung der durch grausame Erziehung entstandenen Schäden. Eltern, die die Verletzungen ihrer eigenen Kindheit gefühlt haben, werden sensibler und hellhöriger für die Bedürfnisse ihrer Kinder.
[The goal of therapy, in my opinion, is the resolution of the parents' own wounds from a painful upbringing. Parents who truly understand their own childhood wounds become more sensitive and open to the needs of their children.]

Question Sheet Response Prompt:
Checken Sie, die am besten passende Ergänzung für das Gespräch:
[Check the best paraphrase items for the conversation:]

1. *Diese Therapeutin, Frau Miller, will hauptsächlich, dass…*
[The therapist, Frau Miller, hopes that above all…]

a. *Eltern ihre Kinder nie schlagen* [parents will never hit their children]
b. *Eltern ihre Kinder so verantwortungsvoll wie möglich achten* [children will be as obedient as possible]
c. *Eltern eine Erziehungstherapie suchen* [parents will seek therapy]

2. *Der Erziehungsstil der Eltern ist so bedeutend, nach Therapeutin Miller . . .*
[The child-rearing style of the parents is so important, according to Miller . . .]

a. *weil das Kind dadurch erlernt, wie es im ganzen Leben mit anderen umgehen kann*
[because it teaches the child how to get along in life with others]
b. *weil es dem Kind so tief schaden kann, wenn Eltern es schlagen*
[because it can hurt the child so deeply when parents spank or hit]
c. *weil die Eltern dadurch ihre eigene Verzweiflung ins Auge sehen müssen*
[because parents need to come to terms with their own anger and confusion when they raise a child]

Fühlen Sie sich mit Ihrer Antwort sicher? *Ja / Nein (einkreisen)*
[Do you feel certain about your answers?] Yes/ No (circle one)

**Excerpted from "Angst vor starken Gefühlen," ("Fear of strong feelings") Der Spiegel 35/1990, reprinted in full in H. Zimmer-Loew & Moss, A. (Ed.). (1993). Der Spiegel: Aktuelle Themen in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland (pp. 93–96). Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co.*

Appendix B

Background Questionnaire

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Gender:
4. Please describe your total amount of classroom experience with German as follows:
   a. high school years:
   b. college semesters:
   c. study or work abroad months:
5. Please classify your status in German: (circle one)
   a. native speaker (raised speaking/hearing/using German since very early childhood)
   b. graduate student (nonnative speaker)
   c. advanced undergraduate (nonnative speaker)
6. If you are a nonnative speaker, at what age were you first exposed to German?
   a. through instruction:
   b. through immersion (extended stay in a German-speaking country):
7. How many total months/years have you spent in a German-speaking country or in an exclusively German-speaking environment?
8. Please describe your in-country German language experiences: Fill in all applicable contexts for your immersion stays in Germany or a German-speaking country, describe where you were, how long you were in each environment, and with whom you interacted linguistically the most (native vs. nonnative speakers of German).

Context	Exact Location	Time Spent (Months or Years)	Primary Source for Language Use/Practice (circle one)
Work/ Professional			Native/nonnative speakers
School			Native/nonnative speakers
Family/ home environment			Native/nonnative speakers
Friends (visiting)			Native/nonnative speakers
Other (please describe)			Native/nonnative speakers

9. Current use of German: Please describe your use of German (i.e., for all activities you regularly engage in, outside of the classroom. Please provide details on contexts for use and time spent per day or week, according to the space provided. If you need more room to write, you can use the space below for additional details.

Contexts for German outside of the classroom	Time spent in this context (Hours per day or week)
Talking with friends and acquaintances	
Using German in a professional setting	
Around campus or town (please describe the nature of the activities)	
Watching TV or films	
Writing email/ using the Internet	
Other (please describe)	