

# Development of Coping Processes Against “Listening Stress”

## 「リスニングストレス」の対処過程の発達

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### Abstract

The present study reexamines the model of the cognitive appraisal process and circular mechanisms of “listening stress” conceptualized and designed by the present author. It has been pointed out that the model did not adequately organize the coping component, causing logical incoherence. The role of listening commitments in reappraisal has been also questioned. By reviewing psychological stress theories, this study reorganizes the coping component of the appraisal model and reformulates listening commitments and reappraisal with the idea of cognitive reframing. It also examines the results of a small-scale pilot study exploring the development of these coping processes conducted by the present author to provide basic data for more detailed future research, specifically pointing to the important role of social support in their development. Future research needs more empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, and situation-specific analysis of them, so that more detailed and psychologically-real delineation of the mechanisms of the use and development of coping against listening stress should become possible.

**Key words:** listening, stress, anxiety, coping, circular mechanism

### 1. Introduction

Anxiety in second/foreign language (L2/FL) learning is often referred to as “language anxiety” and has been widely researched for its influence on L2/FL use and learning (e.g., Scovel, 1978; Horwitz, Horwitz, & Cope, 1986; MacIntyre & Gardner 1991a, 1991b; MacIntyre, 1999). It has been approached as “situation-specific anxiety”, that is, the kind of anxiety aroused in specific situations. This situation-specific anxiety approach, however, tends to mostly focus on its arousal conditions, including each individual’s inclination to anxiety, and does not consider the aspect of ongoing experience of anxiety itself or better known as “state anxiety”. It is the aspect of state rather than situation-specific anxiety that should be focused on in order to better understand language anxiety at work. Thus, the approach with the situation-specific anxiety orientation alone is not expected to contribute much to the explication of the effects of language anxiety on cognitive processing in real time.

In elucidation of the mechanisms of the interactive and dynamic involvement of anxiety-related emotions in cognitive processing in L2/FL listening, the present author introduced the construct of “listening stress” as replacing the widely accepted construct of “listening anxiety”, a subcategory

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of language anxiety. It was tentatively defined as “the psychological inhibition resulting from psychological tenseness, irritation, frustration, and the like that L2/FL learners experience in the face of listening difficulties” (Noro, 2009a, p. 158). The introduction of listening stress is an attempt to integrate both the situation-specific and state anxiety orientations in the traditional listening anxiety research paradigm as well. A series of research projects undertaken on the basis of psychological stress theories, especially those put forward by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), yielded schematic models of its construct structure and the cognitive appraisal process (Noro, 2006, 2007), explored its circular mechanisms (Noro, 2009a), and evidenced its debilitating effects on the comprehension process (Noro, 2009b). As for the debilitating effects, it was also suggested that comprehension deteriorated by way of listening stress adversely affecting the use of listening strategies (Noro, 2010).

The use of listening strategies in the face of difficult listening tasks can be seen as a form of employment of coping against psychological stress. In fact, as listening strategies are broadly classified into two categories: cognitive and affective, so is coping into two types: cognitive-focused and emotion-focused. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explain that the former is “directed at managing or altering the problem causing the distress,” while the latter at “regulating emotional response to the problem” (p. 150). Thus, it might be envisioned that the debilitating effects of listening stress on the use of listening strategies, either cognitive or affective, should be explained by the analogy of more general psychological stress overwhelming one’s resources for coping, or more straightforwardly, by the same mechanisms. But, is this really the case? Obviously, there are listeners who are so anxious and distressed that they are left totally at a loss, not being able to comprehend a word, let alone utilize listening strategies. On the other hand, we do come across listeners who do not seem to understand what their interlocutors say or are unable to use any listening strategies and feel severe listening stress at first, but become very poised and self-composed in time even when they still do not understand well, and eventually attain a certain level of comprehension through maximizing their resources at hand, including what little knowledge of listening strategies they have. How do they do that? Do they have some special talent that they are born with? Or, did they learn how to do it in some other way?

In response to those questions mentioned above, the present study reexamines the model of the cognitive appraisal process and circular mechanisms of listening stress conceptualized and designed by the present author (Noro, 2007, 2010) and discusses its vulnerability. It directly addresses the problems of the circular mechanisms of listening stress, with a focus on listening strategies and coping strategies, and of lowering of the listening commitment level as part of reappraisal, with a view to improving the model and explicating the developmental process of coping against listening stress. It also reviews the formulations of coping processes against general psychological stress by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Aldwin (2007), among others, and discusses the possibility of utilizing them for the theorization of coping processes against listening stress. Furthermore, it examines the results of a small-scale pilot study conducted by the present author to provide basic data for the analysis of the developmental process of coping against listening stress.

## **2. Debilitating Effects of Listening Stress**

### *Circular Mechanisms of Listening Stress*

It is widely agreed upon in psychological stress theories that arousal of stress is triggered by cognitive appraisal of possible stressors. With a view to explaining the arousal mechanisms of listening stress, interview and questionnaire data were examined both qualitatively and quantitatively, yielding a schematic model of the cognitive appraisal process (Noro, 2007). The model, which was based on Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) cognitive appraisal theory, comprises of three components:

cognitive appraisal, coping, and stress responses, each of which is shown as interacting with the other two and contributing to the circular mechanisms unique to listening stress. That is, when listening difficulties arising from factors, such as delivery speed, vocabulary, and pronunciation, are cognitively appraised as exceeding the listener’s capability in the primary appraisal stage, initial stress responses, like nervousness, irritation, and frustration, emerge. At the same time, coping against the listening difficulties, that is, various kinds of listening strategies take action, and if those listening strategies are appraised as effective and helping to overcome the difficulties in secondary appraisal, the initial stress responses are most likely to disappear. If they are appraised as not working, however, the initial stress responses will be intensified and diversified, bringing reappraisal into effect, which is supposed to change the preceding appraisals on the basis of new information from the environment, that is, the listening situations, and/or information from the person’s own reactions, that is, the listener’s recognition of them, so that the stress responses may be alleviated, or rather aggravated in some cases.

The most noteworthy feature of this model is the fact that the coping component is embedded within the appraisal process itself. Unlike other general psychological stress models, this model presumes that listening stress first and foremost affects coping adversely, that is, the use of listening strategies, leading to a lowering in comprehension. This very inclusion of the coping component embedded in the appraisal process represents the circular nature of listening stress and its debilitating effects. Thus, it could be easily conceived that once the listener falls into this circle, it is rather difficult to escape from it (Noro, 2009a).

As explained in the previous section, the mechanisms of listening stress adversely affecting the use of listening strategies were suggested by the small-scale stress-inducing experiment conducted with Japanese learners of English (Noro, 2010). The scores of those listening tasks requiring the use of listening strategies such as inferencing and generalization/application of information indicated a sharp drop among the subjects who reported the experience of severe stress, while the listeners who did not feel much stress maintained high scores in those same listening tasks. The circular effects were also observed in this experiment, which indicates the possibility of the existence of the mechanisms of coping embedded in the appraisal process and adversely affected by listening stress at the same time, as theorized by the model. The problem with the model including coping embedment in the appraisal process is how to explain the development of coping against listening stress. If coping against listening stress is composed of the traditional listening strategies alone, be they cognitive, like inferencing and using background knowledge, or affective, like relaxing and not worrying too much, how can those who once suffered from listening stress come to terms with it over time, while their listening strategies use is always compromised under stress? Or, is there some other kind of coping at work? If so, is it the same as coping against general psychological stress, or is it something unique to listening stress? The following section addresses these questions by considering theories of coping processes against general psychological stress, but before that, let us consider another issue regarding the cognitive appraisal model of listening stress, that is, the issue of commitment and reappraisal, which will have direct relevance to the discussion of coping processes made in the next section.

#### *Lowering of Commitment Levels and Reappraisal*

Commitment is considered an important person factor influencing cognitive appraisal in Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) psychological stress theory. They describe commitments as “[expressing] what is important to the person” and “[underlying] the choices people make or are prepared to make to maintain valued ideals and/or to achieve desired goals” (p. 56). In their model, commitments

are regarded as an important causal antecedent, along with values and beliefs. According to their psychological stress formulation, a stronger commitment makes the person more vulnerable to psychological stress in the areas of that commitment.

Through analysis of questionnaire and interview data, Noro (2007) observed lowering of the level of listening commitments as the participants experienced listening stress. For example, one of the participants reported that, although he had wished to understand everything that was said to him, upon realizing that it was impossible, he had lowered the level of his wish and had decided to be satisfied with understanding a rough idea. The lowering of the listening commitment level that this participant exhibited was interpreted as manifesting defense mechanisms against the stress that he was suffering. It was regarded as part of the reexamination of the information from the person's own reactions, which was formulated by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) as comprising reappraisal, along with the reassessment of the information from the environment, as mentioned in the previous subsection. Thus, the cognitive appraisal model for listening stress set listening commitments as a target of reappraisal, illustrating possible alleviation of stress responses through lowering of the level of listening commitments.

However, in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) formulation of psychological stress, "the very strength of commitment that creates vulnerability can also impel a person toward a course of action that can reduce the threat and help sustain coping efforts in the face of obstacles" (p. 58). If we accept this contention of theirs, lowering of the commitment level should have no place in alleviation of stress responses. On the contrary, it should follow that coping efforts might be appraised as meaningless and most likely be abandoned, causing further stress to be perpetuated in the circular mechanisms. It will also undermine logical coherence to posit commitment for reappraisal, thus requiring resolution of this contradiction.

Actually, the idea of lowering of the level of listening commitments is in accordance with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) psychological stress theory, as they also acknowledge defense mechanisms in reappraisal, which they call *defensive reappraisal*. They explain it as "[consisting] of any effort made to reinterpret the past more positively, or to deal with present harms and threats by viewing them in less damaging and/or threatening ways" (p. 38). Lowering of the listening commitment level has basically the same orientation, except that it takes a more conscious and reflective approach to the environment and/or oneself, compared to the rather unconscious or automatic nature of defense mechanisms. However, Lazarus and Folkman emphasizes the need to differentiate defensive reappraisal from ordinary, information-based appraisal. They specifically point out that defensive reappraisal should be discussed in the framework of cognitive coping. This outlook of defensive reappraisal as cognitive coping is expected to give a new perspective to the lowering of the listening commitment level and reappraisal in listening stress.

### **3. Development of Coping Against Listening Stress**

#### *Coping as Developing Processes*

Before examining the coping processes in the listening stress context, let us review how coping is considered and discussed in the general psychological stress research framework. Coping was traditionally viewed as a style or trait which helped to predict how people will deal with stressful events. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) explicitly object this traditional view of coping, criticizing it for "[underestimating] the complexity and variability of actual coping efforts" (p. 129), and underscore the need for direct assessment of coping. As an alternative, they propose a process-centered approach to coping. Lazarus and Folkman define coping as "constantly changing cognitive and behavioral efforts to manage specific external and/or internal demands that are appraised as taxing or exceeding the

resources of the person” (p. 141). They point to the nature of process-oriented rather than the traditional trait-oriented nature of this definition by highlighting the wording of “constantly changing” and “specific demands” in it.

Directly in line with Lazarus and Folkman’s (1984) psychological stress theory is Aldwin’s formulation (2007). She discusses the three causal models of coping: reductionist, interactionist, and transactionist models. The reductionist model views coping as simple responses to stressful environments. The interactionist model hypothesizes coping to be a function of personal and environmental characteristics, whereas in the transactionist model, of which the best-known theory is most probably Lazarus and Folkman’s, personal and environmental factors are viewed as influencing appraisal, which determines coping selection, with its outcomes influencing back the cognitive appraisal process in turn. In this transactionist model, she finds a circular process where the person, situation, and behavior become enmeshed, which echoes the debilitating circular mechanisms of listening stress that the present author aims to elucidate. She also sees the process as developmental in nature. Her explication of the transactionist model as well as Lazarus and Folkman’s theorization of coping as a process will provide a sound rationale for the discussion of coping processes against listening stress below, especially in terms of the circular and developmental perspectives.

Another quick review of coping in terms of its mediating factors or determinants would help to deepen our discussion of coping against listening stress. Through extensive examination of the previous research, Aldwin (2007) details the involvement of personality and situational factors in coping processes in the transactionist orientation. With personality factors, she suggests the feedback mechanisms of personality processes maintained or replaced depending on appraisal results. As for situational determinants, she exemplifies the environmental demands affecting coping selection as “different types of stresses ‘pull for’ different types of solutions and coping process” (p. 113). For the development of coping against listening stress, various kinds of mediating factors should be at work, and the examination of their mutual interactive relationships, or the “transactions”, will add to more in-depth elucidation of its mechanisms.

Let us take one final look at what Aldwin (2007) discusses under the heading of “more recent approaches” (p. 117). Among others, “meaning making” and social aspects of coping should bear special importance to our discussion of listening stress. Meaning making, also called cognitive reframing, refers to the act of making sense of the problem. Aldwin suggests the possibility of cognitive reframing including a reappraisal of the stressful event. She also quotes Folkman and Moskowitz’s argument that “situational meaning making is more of an appraisal process but one that is nonetheless related to coping” (as cited in Aldwin, 2007, p. 121). Following this orientation, cognitive reframing could have a part to play in the reappraisal process of listening stress as well as provide a basis for resolving the seemingly contradictory nature of listening commitments. The latter, that is, social aspects of coping, are mostly discussed in terms of the significance and effects of providing social support, especially with chronic stress. In dealing with listening stress experienced for a longer period of time, in particular, the availability of social support will most likely make a difference, which might give a developmental perspective to listening stress. The results of the pilot study conducted by the present author do suggest the facilitative effects of social support for the development of coping, as discussed below.

### *Coping Processes Against Listening Stress*

As explained in the previous section, the cognitive appraisal model of listening stress hypothesized the debilitating effects to be exercised directly on the use of listening strategies. In other words, coping,

which is expected to help to alleviate stress, is also the target of the stress itself. This model was carefully designed so as to represent the circular debilitating mechanisms of listening stress. However, it must be noted that, although this model does seem to succeed in describing the circular mechanisms adequately, it still leaves room for improvement. The process-centered transactionist approach to coping has informed an improved concentric model of the coping component in the cognitive appraisal formulation. The improved model organizes the coping component so that it will include a wider range of coping strategies in the manner of concentric circles expanding outward. The innermost circle will contain individual problem-focused cognitive listening strategies against specific listening difficulties, while emotion-focused metacognitive listening strategies will be located in the immediate outer circle, and in the outermost circle more general problem- and emotion-focused coping strategies will be placed to better control listening situations.

In this improved model, where the debilitating effects of listening stress are assumed to be exerted on the entire coping component, which itself can still explain the circular mechanisms, the more direct and severer adverse effects will be found on the inner circle of individual listening problem-focused cognitive strategies with the influence permeating into the outer circles. In the face of listening difficulties, the listener employs different circles, or levels, of coping on the basis of his or her appraisal and reappraisal. As the listener grows and enriches his or her repertoire of coping against listening stress, the more general coping strategies in the outermost circle may not be affected adversely, helping to lessen the debilitating effects on the coping strategies in the inner circles and enabling them to fully perform their functions against listening stress, which will, in turn, lead to alleviation of listening stress. Thus, the approach to coping as developing processes is expected to explain the way out of the debilitating circular mechanisms as well.

Another aspect that pertains to coping against listening stress and its development is listening commitments and reappraisal. As discussed in the previous section, lowering the listening commitment level, which is hypothesized as a form of reappraisal in the listening stress model by Noro (2007), does not seem to be well rehearsed, allowing the deduction of two contradictory resultant interpretations: a reduction in vulnerability versus abandonment of coping efforts. Cognitive reframing, as suggested in the previous subsection, might help to resolve this contradiction by rephrasing *lowering of the listening commitment level* as *lowering of expectations in the listening situations*. It is evidenced that distressed listeners tend to lower the level of what they wish to achieve in the listening situations, but what they actually do is lower their expectations but not necessarily their commitment level. It would be more reasonable to interpret this as the listener's efforts of reappraising the listening difficulties, the resources at his or her disposal, including listening strategies, and their effectiveness, and the legitimacy of his or her expectations. Naturally, listening commitments and expectations should be closely related to each other. However, they will not always correlate. Some listeners, whose commitments are very strong, may strategically lower their expectations to avoid further stress, while others, whose commitments may not be as strong, may hold onto their initial expectations in spite of the risk of experiencing severer stress. Listening commitments themselves can be changed over time in the course of experiencing listening stress time and again, but their level should not necessarily be lowered; rather, it is more likely to be the case that they are strengthened as the listener grows to be a better listener, or the strengthened commitments may be evidence of listener development.

#### *Pilot Study of Development of Coping Against Listening Stress*

In order to provide basic data for the explication of the development of the coping processes against listening stress, a small-scale pilot study was designed with interview and questionnaire survey by

the present author. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five Japanese college students who had stayed in English-speaking countries for 8 to 10 months. Preliminary qualitative analysis of the interview and questionnaire data showed that clarification requests and predicting/guessing had been employed most frequently as problem-focused coping. For emotion-focused coping, change of attitudes toward L2 listening in general was found to be a crucial strategy. The participants reported that they had lowered their expectations in listening from time to time as they found it rather difficult to understand everything. It was obvious that they had done that in order to reduce their listening stress as part of reappraisal. It was also revealed that the participants had developed and internalized these strategies through modeling and/or experiential learning.

After the initial screening, three participants were chosen for further analysis as candidates for critical cases in terms of coping development. As a result of in-depth analysis of these three cases, social support, self-analysis, and a growing sense of purpose in L2 learning emerged as possible key mediating factors in the development of coping. In particular, those who had experienced home stay considered social support from their host family extremely important not only in learning coping strategies but also in maintaining their listening commitments. They had wanted to understand and make themselves understood by their loved ones so badly. Those who had not experienced home stay also valued social support highly. They reflected that they had been able to overcome their listening stress only because they had tried so hard to build relationships with their friends and classmates. These results suggest that, although listening stress itself may emerge as harmful and threatening, it could be regarded as an experience to trigger and promote the development of coping, which will eventually lead to the development and adaptation of the listener him- or herself.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This study reexamined the model of the cognitive appraisal process and circular mechanisms of listening stress conceptualized and designed by the present author (Noro, 2007, 2010) and discussed its vulnerability. It directly addressed the problems of the circular mechanisms of listening stress, with a focus on listening strategies and coping strategies, and of lowering of the listening commitment level as part of reappraisal, with a view to improving the model and explicating developmental processes of coping against listening stress. By reviewing the psychological stress theories put forward by Lazarus and Folkman (1984) and Aldwin (2007), the present study reorganized the coping component of the appraisal model. It also reformulated listening commitments and reappraisal with the idea of cognitive reframing. Furthermore, it examined the results of a small-scale pilot study conducted by the present author to provide basic data for more detailed future research, specifically pointing to the important role of social support in the development of coping against listening stress.

Although the present study proposed an improved model of the cognitive appraisal process of listening stress and provided basic insight into the developmental process of coping, future research needs more empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, and situation-specific analysis of them, so that more detailed and psychologically-real delineation of the mechanisms of the use and development of coping against listening stress should become possible.

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