

Blended learning in a listening course: Seeking best practices

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This paper focuses on the use of blended instruction in curriculum development by reporting on a newly developed listening course designed for freshmen and sophomore English majors (about 580 students in total) that combines in-class task-based instruction supported by a variety of online and off-line listening resources, online monitored self access, and the use of vetted, freely available, online listening content that students report on through "listening logs". The impetus for the new course came from a variety of feedback mechanisms including student evaluations, an extensive course needs assessment (Kikuchi, 2001) involving the administration of surveys, classroom observations and interviews with students in focus groups. The new curriculum makes use of such online resources as YouTube and Video Jug.com, as well as commercially available products. The development process involved piloting the new course, and teacher orientations to introduce them to the new roles they would be called upon to play.

これは英米文学科の約580人の新入生と二年生を対象に作られた新開発リスニングコースについての報告による教科展開の中で“Blended Learning”(ブレンディッド・ラーニング)の利用に焦点を当てたものです。様々なオンライン、オフラインのリスニング教材や、授業中の基本作業指導、オンラインによる自己学習方法の監視とその利用を厳しく吟味し随時にかつ“Listening Logs”からの学生のレポートを併せたものです。この新しいコースのきっかけは学生評価、上級コースの査定(キクチ、2001)の必要性、大学管理部調査、教室観察そして中心グループ内の学生インタビューを含めた様々なフィードバック機構によりもたらされました。この新しい教科課程は商業ベースの商品同様にYou-Tube やVideo Jug のオンライン源による利用を可能にします。その開発過程には新コースを導き彼らに求める新しい学習方法を彼らに紹介するための教職員オリエンテーションが含まれます。

DRAWING UPON CALL as well as traditional pedagogy, a blended learning approach to listening can combine individualized instruction, ease of access outside the classroom, and varied and attractive listening materials with the strengths of effective teaching, an attractive text and support materials, and frequent interactions between students. This paper describes the development of a blended learning approach in a listening course in an EAP program at a Japanese university. The account also illustrates how online surveys can direct subsequent course revision.

Active Listening is the newest course in our English Department's Integrated English Program (IEP), a program for 580 freshmen and sophomores which was initiated in 1992. The writers of this article serve as administrators and course developers for the program, three



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different skill-based courses for English majors. In addition to Active Listening, students must take IE Writing which offers instruction in writing paragraphs and essays, and IE Core, a course that features all four skills, and includes discussion, intensive and extensive reading as well as book reports, and journal writing. To address differences in language ability among students, the students are tested upon entering the IEP and assigned to one of three levels of difficulty. Thirty-five instructors (Japanese and native speakers) teach in the program. Following suggestions made by Brinton, Snow and Wesche (2003) for organizing language curricula, the listening, writing, and core skills courses are organized around content; for example, in Active Listening III, the high-interest themes of relationships/psychology, cross-cultural communications, the media, and the environment.

The emerging syllabus for Active Listening

The precursor to Active Listening had been a typical teacher-centered listening comprehension course in which teachers showed video segments drawn from documentaries, TV shows, and films, then called upon students to answer questions. Although this listening course had been revised several times, student evaluations of it were very mixed (Dias & Kikuchi, 2010; Kikuchi, 2001).

To generate greater student interest in the new listening course, and to call forth more innovative teaching strategies, we realized a radical re-design was necessary. Renaming the course *Active Listening* reflected our break with the past and our search for more effective student-centered listening instruction.

First, we drew upon the research on task-based learning to develop listening tasks for the course that would entail more student discussion rather than simply answering listening comprehension questions. Long and Robinson (1998) suggest

that the negotiation of meaning that occurs while performing a task will better assist students in language learning. This is in contrast with traditional approaches that assume that students need to be taught language first, in order to communicate. Ellis (2005) describes task-based learning as a powerful tool in language learning because it seeks not only to teach language but “to engage learners in authentic acts of communication in the classroom” (p. 6).

In addition to introducing language learning tasks into the new course, we sought video content that was both contemporary and authentic. Brown (1994) emphasizes the importance of choosing listening material that will “appeal to the listener’s personal interests and goals” and will enable the listener “to see the relevance of classroom activity to their long term communicative goals” (p. 245). Therefore, to make the course more interesting and relevant and in order to give it greater face validity for our students, both returnees and domestically educated, we needed contemporary content that combined materials developed for an EFL/ESL context as well as those for native speakers. In the past, most of our limited resources in developing curricular materials had been devoted to the laborious effort of selecting video segments, transcribing them, then developing and revising student exercises to be used with them. After this long process, the materials were used for several years and eventually appeared out of date. Furthermore, the listening course was now taught in a CALL classroom with an Internet connection and its features were being under-utilized. The demands for current, relevant material and the untapped potential of our CALL classroom suggested that we use material from popular video-sharing websites such as YouTube and Video Jug for our classes.

Finally, we wanted the new course to allow students more choice by enabling them to select some of their study materials and to access them at a time and place of their choosing. We



hoped that exposure to a range of listening materials on the Internet that students had to vet, select, and study, would make them take a modest step in the direction of autonomy or “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). By becoming more autonomous, students could better meet their own needs in terms of finding materials closely matched to their level and interests. The use of the Internet also meant that we could avoid designating a physical space for self-access materials at the university library, the English Department office, or our Foreign Language Laboratory. Listening resources could be offered online in an efficient manner.

New components in Active Listening

After experimenting with a variety of classroom tasks by piloting them with students in other courses, we developed four components for the new course: *listening interactions*, *listening presentations*, *self-directed listening reports*, and *monitored self-access to online listening content*. The first three tasks used online streaming media available on the Internet. Although we drew upon YouTube, we also identified many lesser-known video streaming sites that were both useful and offered fewer distractions in the form of frivolous video content (see Appendix 1 for a list of streaming video sites related to environmental issues, Active Listening III).

Listening interactions

This task takes place several times over the semester. The teacher circulates a “sign-up list” for students to choose a time when they will lead a small group discussion on video content related to one of the course themes. Before the discussion in class, each student leader chooses a video segment from the websites suggested by the teacher. The student leader also transcribes the video segment, and prepares a worksheet of pre-

listening, while-listening, and post-listening questions. In class, the teacher forms small groups of three or four students and assigns a student leader to each one. Each student leader refers to the worksheet prepared for class and asks the group to answer some pre-listening questions, then shows the video segment, and asks the students to answer the rest of the questions on the worksheet. Each round of discussions is to be completed within 15-20 minutes. Afterward, the leader changes the groups. If time allows, this can be repeated a third time.

The repetition that we built into the task drew upon research by Bygate (2001) who had studied 48 overseas language students describing a video that they had seen 10 weeks earlier. He found that with repetition of this task, the students achieved greater levels of fluency, accuracy, and grammatical complexity. Bygate concluded that “previous experience of a task is available for speakers to build on in subsequent performance” (p. 43) and that it assists them “in formulating more complex and/or more fluent performance” (p. 44).

We found that the repetition of the task aided our students in describing their videos. They also appeared more confident with each successive repetition. Over the semester, the students leading the interaction task also gradually became more sensitive to the preferences and listening comprehension skills of their classmates. And as a group, through viewing a wide variety of authentic video segments, the class was exposed to diverse examples of the redundancies, reduced forms, and such performance variables as hesitations, false starts, and corrections that are found in spoken discourse.

Self-directed listening reports

This listening task has students access pre-vetted language learning websites, ones either expressly intended for EFL/ESL listening or ones that possess features supporting language



learning by offering learning aids such as transcripts and closed captions (see Appendix 2). Outside of class, students individually access the recommended sites and produce five or six log entries of their experiences, summarizing the site's content, describing how they interacted with it, listing new words or phrases they learned from it, then reporting whether or not they would recommend it to others. (See Appendix 4 for a Self-directed Listening Report form.)

Although we found that this component of the course was generally well-received by students, an area which we needed to address was in providing teachers with some samples of well-written summaries to show the students in our classes how much detail and structure was needed.

Listening presentations

In groups of 3 or 4, students jointly prepare and deliver presentations in front of the class, a task-based project focusing on a streaming video of their choice. Before selecting a video, students have to vet numerous videos. Their next step is to choose an emcee for their presentation, an order for the speakers, and finally, a student to summarize and to offer a conclusion from the group. In Active Listening III, students could choose to do a presentation based on either cross-cultural communication or preparing an action plan for an environmental issue (see Figure 1).

We soon learned that while this task was popular with both students and teachers, it needed more scaffolding. A series of student performance criteria were developed, tested, then revised, and later incorporated into a checklist for teachers and students (see Appendix 3). Additionally, we filmed several student presentations to serve as models for other teachers and their classes.

Monitored self-access to online listening content

Like *in-class teacher instruction*, the course component of *monitored self-access* entails using a commercial product. We wanted a product that students could access on the Internet and track their progress. After reviewing many options, we decided on the *New Practical English* program offered by Real English Broadband (reallyenglish.com, 2009). Students start by taking a placement test. Then drawing on a bank of 300 lessons, the program generates an individualized learning path for each student.

This component of Active Listening proved the most difficult part of the course for teachers to use. They had to become familiar with the software, introduce it to their students, make sure that all their students logged on correctly, created passwords that they could remember, and kept working on it at a steady pace over the term.

In-class teacher instruction

Because we planned to introduce so much change into the new listening course, we thought we had better provide teachers with more traditional types of audio-visual materials as well. These could be used in part of each class. Not only would something familiar make the new course more palatable to teachers, but also it would enable them to provide cultural and linguistic commentary on the video content and directly instruct students in listening strategies. We reviewed the existing commercial materials for one that featured contemporary news and short documentaries and suit the abilities of our students and the overall themes of the IEP. We chose the *Summit DVD 1 & 2, with Activity Worksheets* (2007) which provided an attractive package of authentic news (episodes from the ABC news magazine 20/20) and on-the-street interviews with native speakers, combined with transcripts and cultural notes for each news item, and DVDs with optional close captioning.



Additional Student Assessment: A Listening Test

Although the final grade in the former listening course was mainly based on achievement in a midterm and final exam featuring short answer and multiple-choice items, the new course proved to be somewhat more demanding on teachers. They were called upon to assess student performance in the “interactions,” “presentations,” and “self-directed listening logs,” as well as master the use of the administration features of the *reallyenglish* monitored self-access system. However, through the introduction of checklists and hands on orientations that instructed teachers in how to use the sophisticated tracking system in *reallyenglish*’s Practical English course, teachers gradually came to feel comfortable with the new multipronged methods of evaluation.

One of the aspects of the former course that we decided to retain was the use of an end-of-term listening test for part of the students’ final grade. As most of the student assessment was based on diligence in doing homework assignments and self-access learning, we felt that at least a small portion should include a measure of student listening ability as assessed through a listening test.

Figure 1 shows the whole Active Listening III syllabus with its themes and components. The figure also shows such details as individual lessons from *Summit TV* for *In-class Teacher Instruction*, interaction and presentation tasks, the number of units that students need to complete from *reallyenglish*’s Practical English program for *Teacher-Monitored Self-Access*, the items for *Self-Directed Listening Reports* and the *Listening Test* component. We adjust these percentages during meetings of Active Listening teachers at the end of the semester when we can elicit their feedback about how appropriate the load is for each of the requirements.

IE THEME: Relationships /Psychology	IE THEME: Cross-cultural Communication	IE THEME: Media	IE THEME: Environment
(A) LANGUAGE LEARNING TASKS: INTERACTIONS AND PRESENTATIONS 30%			
INTERAC- TION: Describe a self-help video at <i>videojug.com</i>	PRESENTA- TION: Intro- duce a video on cross-cultural communica- tions	INTER- ACTION: Introduce your favorite English movie trailer	PRESENTA- TION: Prepare an action plan for an environ- mental problem
(B) SELF-DIRECTED LISTENING REPORTS 20%			
Homework -- Students complete <u>4 reports</u> from ESL / EFL listening websites on the Internet.			
(C) TEACHER-MONITORED SELF ACCESS 25%			
Homework -- Students complete <u>25 units</u> of the <i>New Practical English</i> program.			
(D) IN-CLASS TEACHER INSTRUCTION 5%			
<i>SUMMIT TV</i> 2-1 #: <u>On-the- Street</u> : “Strengths and Weaknesses: I’m Really Good At...”	<i>SUMMIT TV</i> 2-8 #: <u>Short Documentary</u> : “The Simpsons”	<i>SUMMIT TV</i> 1-7 #: <u>On- the-Street</u> : Advertising: “I think there’s too much”	<i>SUMMIT TV</i> 2-10 #: <u>Short Documentary</u> : “The Ndoki Rain Forest”
(E) LISTENING TEST 20%			

Figure 1. IE III Active Listening Syllabus

Implementing curricular change

Curtis (1999), reviewing the published literature on curriculum implementation, suggests that the process depends on teachers as agents of change. Their support is based on the perceived benefits of the course, its compatibility with existing teacher practices, and the relative complexity of the new course. Given



the demands of Active Listening, we realized that we would have to commit substantial resources to implement it.

We began with in-service education of prospective teachers of the course, explaining the rationale for the Active Listening course, then demonstrating how teachers would introduce such components as the *listening interactions* and *listening presentations*, and showing videos of some of our pilot classes.

The online component of the course delivered through the *reallyenglish* website proved the most challenging as it required teachers to log-in to the site, familiarize themselves with the program, introduce it in class, and then monitor student progress over the term, and create group messages for their students to keep them progressing at a steady rate. Another problem that became apparent was that some students forgot their passwords and then had trouble logging back on. In a few cases, students had firewalls on their home computers or other technical obstacles. After discussions with Real English Broadband, the company simplified the log-in procedure the following term. We also coached all the Active Listening teachers in devoting part of the first class to ensuring that all students were registered, created a password that would be easy to remember, and practiced logging onto the site and using it.

Gradually, over the first two semesters, leaders emerged from among the Active Listening teachers, who came to serve as mentors, both informally in the teachers' room between classes and more formally by giving presentations to their peers, at our request, for teacher orientations at the beginning of the academic year.

Evaluation of the Active Listening course

Early on, we wanted to gauge teacher reactions to the new listening course. First, an online survey of teachers, given through *SurveyMonkey*, was administered in July 2009, after the first semester that Active Listening was offered. Six NS teachers

and nine Japanese Active Listening teachers were questioned through a variety of open and closed question items. Ten of the fifteen teachers surveyed (67%) felt that Active Listening was an improvement over the earlier listening course, while two were not sure, and three were unable to judge since they were teaching the course for the first time.

In general, teachers were satisfied with the *listening interactions*, but they offered some constructive suggestions such as "They went well, but the group size was too big. I divided the class into groups of 6, but 4 would have been better." Teachers' views of *self-directed listening reports* were also favorable. Some representative comments were:

I was glad that the students chose a wide variety of sites and their reports were genuinely interesting for me to read as their reflections were thoughtful. They appreciated my comments on what they had written.

As the *teacher-monitored self access* part of the course was the most self-paced, many students had trouble budgeting their time for it. That led one frustrated teacher to comment:

You cannot leave it up to the students to just get it done. You must stay on top of them. Give them deadlines and penalties.

Teachers who had sampled the modules prior to their use in the course, were the most impressed by them. One Japanese instructor went through the whole suite of modules and took the associated quizzes out of personal interest and enthusiasm. Contrary to previous expectations, 10 of the 15 teachers surveyed said that they were using the system's notification function to prod students who were behind. All teachers soon mastered how to track student progress and even how to detect students who were gaming the system by skipping the lessons and taking the unit tests at the end.



Student reactions

We administered a second online survey one and a half years after the course had been introduced. At that point, some students who had started in the IEP at Level I were now completing the third level of the program and doing Active Listening III. We found that some of these students had negative responses to the statement: "I like the self-access learning system." A strong possibility was that fatigue in the self-contained program had set in after students had experienced two semesters of it. As a result, we are now looking at a new product, *Let's Talk Online*, offered by the same company in cooperation with Cambridge University Press. This online program has more content for higher level students and contains a speaking component. The majority of students overall, however, found *reallyenglish* to be very useful, many making comments such as "Thanks to *reallyenglish* I come to be able to understand what English speakers say" and "I improved my listening ability."

At the same time, other students found the online component of the course boosted their confidence, as exemplified by the comments "I could improve my listening and reading ability by using *reallyenglish*" and "*reallyenglish* was so useful. I'll try a higher level."

Reallyenglish provided a safe, controlled environment. This was in contrast to the relative chaos of YouTube and other streaming sites which furnished the content for the interactions.

Of all the tasks introduced in the listening program, the *listening interactions* were most frequently characterized as fun, interesting, and useful by students. This was true across levels and regardless of whether the class was taught by a native speaker or Japanese instructor. As both the tasks involved presenting (either individually or in a small group) self-selected content to classmates, the students did not make a clear distinction between them when responding to the course evaluation. Gener-

ally, students felt that the tasks were efficacious for improving their listening ability:

Everyone, including myself, did presentations aggressively. It helped me improve my listening skills.

It was very effective. We should experience presentations many times.

We were pleased that even more students felt the tasks were beneficial for the improvement of skills not directly related to listening:

Presentations were good for learning speaking and also listening (as an audience member).

I could learn how to be attractive to an audience.

It's very good for improving the skill of making materials.

These serendipitous advantages were valued by the students and not seen as distractions from the putative purpose of the course, the improvement of listening skills. The students also made positive comments about the tasks, comments that we classified as either *knowledge enhancing*, or *confidence building* in that they gave a feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment, or *psychosocially relevant* in that the students felt that they learned to cooperate with other students, or learned that it was important to be attentive when listening and talking to one another.

Naturally, not all the students praised the two tasks of *listening interactions* and *listening presentations*. Their criticisms mostly stemmed from practical or personal issues and these ranged from complaints about the difficulty of finding good videos (surprisingly rare considering the profusion of poor quality



content on YouTube and other video streaming sites), and the inconvenience of having to meet fellow group members outside of class. Group work is not suited to all students and a small minority felt that working in groups impeded their progress.

Although the students' feedback on *the self-directed listening reports* was overwhelmingly positive, more complaints were raised about this task than the interactions and presentations. Some students wished for more guidance in selecting resources while others, who found that they had too many to do at once, wanted their teacher to collect the reports at intervals throughout the semester instead of all at the end of the course.

Positive comments about this task included an appreciation for the freedom of choice. That freedom allowed them to select content in which they were genuinely interested, or to discover new interests. Just as with the interactions and presentations, some students found serendipitous benefits to the reports beyond helping them make gains in listening comprehension:

Listening reports improved my writing skills.

I can know some new words though the listening reports.

Listening reports could help me to improve my computer skills.

For all of the tasks newly introduced to the program we—and our students—were pleasantly surprised by the fact that listening was not the only one of the four skills being developed. Skills beyond the four skills were also advanced; they included note taking, interpersonal expertise, learning how to be attractive to an audience, and finding out one's own interests.

Future directions

For the time being, we feel that in the short term, the Active Listening course is functioning well and requires only minor adjustments to particular components, especially in terms of expectations of work to be completed. However, there are areas that we are looking at with future changes in mind. One of these is the mobile option where we will need to see which of our current resources are accessible through mobile devices (e.g., Videojug through an iPhone app) with the object of maximizing the English listening opportunities for our students. Secondly, we need to prepare contingency plans if the advertisements on the streaming media sites we use in the course become too intrusive; since the ads are gradually creeping in. Next, we need to measure the incidental learning in the course, for example, investigating how much time and energy students put into vetting streaming media for interactions and presentations.

Finally, we have seen in the feedback from students a decrease in motivation for doing self-access learning (i.e., *real-lyenglish's* Practical English) at the 3rd level, perhaps due to its closed nature and lack of features offering a social element and interaction with their peers or the teacher, so we are now piloting another self-access product with the highest level students that allows them to record their speech while interacting with fictional characters (Real English Broadband, 2005-2011).

As our experience with the Active Listening course shows, at the program level, piloting the components of curricular innovation and planning the implementation is essential. Course implementation must be carefully planned and managed because if teachers experience too much frustration with any part of it, those negative feelings will be extended to the course itself. Good communication between teachers and course writers/administrators is equally important as each plays a part in shaping the course.



Bio data

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Appendix I

Vetted sites for Self-directed Listening Reports

Site Name	URL
Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab	http://www.esl-lab.com/
ESL Bits	http://esl-bits.net/
Voice of America: "Special English News" & "Words and Their Stories"	http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/words_and_their_stories.cfm
BBC's 6- Minute English	http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/general/sixminute/
Video Jug	http://www.videojug.com
Yappr	http://en.yappr.com/welcome/VideoList.action



Appendix 2

Streaming media sites related to the Active Listening III theme of environmental issues

- Ecologist http://www.theecologist.org/tv_and_radio/tv/
A British ecological magazine offering videos on environmental issues around the world.
- Green Channel <http://planetgreen.discovery.com/video/>
Part of Discovery Network. It recently featured videos about the world's greenest homes.
- Greenpeace International <http://www.greenpeace.org/international/en/multimedia/videos/>
Offers videos describing environmental problems and their solutions.
- National Geographic <http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/player/places/index.html>
Has videos on environmental issues and animal-related news.
- 101 East <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/101east/>
Program featuring developments in Asia and includes stories about environmental problems.
- Public Broadcasting Network <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/nature/category/video/>
Presents videos from the program "Nature," on such topics as the American eagle.
- Scientific American <http://www.sciam.com/video.cfm>
Introduces a variety of environmental issues through videos.

Appendix 3

Teacher checklist for scoring presentations


PRESENTATION checklist						
Topic:	Date					
Students:	A	B	C	D	E	
1. Good posture and appropriate eye contact with the audience						
2. Spoke fluently, referring to notes only occasionally						
3. Spoke clearly and with an engaging tone of voice						
4. If the emcee effectively introduced group members, and the topic. If a co-presenter, introduced self, and his/her part of the topic.						
5. As emcee or co-presenter, used appropriate transitions, such as "first of all," "another," "next," or "in comparison," etc.						
6. If the emcee described the group producing the website and video: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » As a co-presenter provided summarized his/her part of the topic well; » If the last speaker, gave a conclusion, i.e., a new suggestion or solution 						
7. Part of a group that managed their presentation time well						
8. Part of a group that chose pictures and other visual aids well						
9. Part of a group that chose a video of appropriate length and content						
10. Part of a group that provided opportunities for the audience to participate by answering questions, and other tasks, such as a survey						





Comments:	Final Score
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Appendix 4: Self-directed Listening Reports

SELF-DIRECTED LISTENING REPORT SHEET

Citation of source 

Description of content 

Reflections 

List of new vocab items & definitions 

Report on an Online Lesson or Other Listening Content

Name _____ Student No. _____

Source (in MLA style) _____

Describe it...

Report what you thought or how you felt about it. Was it easy for you to do? Did you have any frustrations or feelings of satisfaction?

List at least 8 key vocabulary items from the lesson that were NEW to you and their definitions:

45