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Adding Web-based Listening Practice to a Listening Comprehension Course: Cultivating Autonomous Learning

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Introduction

Learners of English as a foreign language have access to a large and growing body of listening material through the Internet. The present study describes a one-semester course in EFL listening comprehension for Japanese college students in which guided and free listening using Web resources played a major role. In particular, it presents and analyzes the results of weekly questionnaires and homework assignments through which the students summarized, gave their opinion, and evaluated the sites. This action research (Craig, 2005) had three aims. The first aim was to find out to what extent Web-based listening can serve as an important component of a listening comprehension course. The second aim was to encourage students to take responsibility for their own listening skills development that would serve as a basis for autonomous language learning (Benson, 2003). The third aim was to identify sites of particular usefulness for students who wish to continue improving their listening comprehension on their own..

Participants

The participants in this study were college and university students enrolled in three English as a foreign language courses in Japan in which training in listening comprehension was the main component of the course. One course was for first-year students, one course was

for second-year students, and one course included both first- and second-year students. Two courses were for English majors and the other was comprised of students majoring in Education or Psychology. All students had studied English previously at the secondary level. The study was conducted during the first semester. Additional information about the participants and courses is summarized in Table 1.

Development of a Web Site for Self-Access Listening Practice

Web sites used in this course came from a variety of sources. The "Links" and "Resources" sections on the Web sites textbook publishers, academic organizations, university sites, the personal home pages of English teachers were major sources of information as well as a Google search using "listening" combined with terms such as EFL, ESL, TEFL, TESOL. Journal articles, both online and hard copy, provided additional sources.

After compiling a long list of sites for consideration, the following criteria were used to narrow down the choices. First, the site had to be free of charge. Sites offering a few sample lessons for free and then requiring payment to continue were not included. Second, there had to be no advertising, or in the case of especially content-rich sites, a minimum of advertising. However, sites with pop-up advertisements and special effects like flashing words or moving animation to attract paying customers were avoided as much as possible. Third, the contents of the sites had to be topics that would likely be of interest to the students in the target courses. Fourth, preference was given to sites that included exercises, quizzes, and transcripts. Fifth, preference was also given to sites that had a user-friendly interface that allowed for easy self-study by EFL users. Finally, the overall selection of sites had to demonstrate a balance of material at various levels of difficulty, elementary through advanced. These criteria served as guidelines for selection. A site did not need to meet every

criterion to be included. Examples of sites used during the course of this study are the following:

Sites for native speakers: Academy of Achievement, American Rhetoric Movie Speeches, CNN for Students, Lives That Make a Difference, Nobel Prize Speeches, Stone Soup, Story Corps, This I Believe, Video Nation

Sites for nonnative speakers: BBC Learning English, CBS/Literacyworks, English Language Listening Lab Online (ELLLO), 5-minute English, Living English (Australia), News California Distance Learning Project, Randall's ESL Lab, Student Times (Japan), Voice of America

After the sites were selected, they were added to the instructor's Web site. For easy of use, many of the links could be accessed from the top page. Others were accessible from a separate page entitled "More Listening Practice" linked to the top page and other links appeared in the course syllabi. Nearly every listening site could be accessed within one to three clicks. To attract attention, many of the links were accompanied by clipart or photographs associated with the sites' contents. Some also had brief descriptions of the purpose and contents of the site. In addition to making the sites easier to find, these graphic and verbal devices aimed to encourage the learners to try many different types of sites and expand their listening experiences.

Data Collection and Analysis

Each of the four courses required the learners to do "free-choice listening" for homework or as part of the in-class activities. The number of listening assignments required depended on the course. For English Comprehension I, the minimum was 9 times, for Oral

English II, 7 times, and for Academic Listening, 10 times. In addition to choosing and listening to a site, the students had to fill in an online survey in which they summarized, gave their opinion, and evaluated each site they listened to. The survey was created using free, online software available from Surveymonkey.com. The free version of this software allows the instructor to create surveys of up to 10 questions and will accept up to 100 respondents per questionnaire. The results of closed-ended questions (e.g., multiple-choice) are analyzed automatically (frequencies and percentages) and displayed graphically (e.g., histograms) or in tables accessible to the instructor. The survey created for this project included both close-ended and open-ended questions and appears in the Appendix. In addition to completing the online survey, students kept a personal record (hard copy) of the sites they visited including date, site, topic, and study time. Students also discussed their free-choice listening experiences in class in small groups or with the teacher.

Results and Discussion

The results of one semester's free-choice listening are summarized in Tables 2 through 5. Group A included the students enrolled in both sections the English Comprehension courses (first-year English majors). Group B represents the Academic Listening students (first- and second year English majors), and Group C represents the Oral English II students (second-year, non-majors).

As seen in Table 2, the English major students (Groups A and B) as a whole were able to complete the number of assigned listening tasks. The non-major students (Group C), however, except for a few enthusiastic learners did very little out-of-class listening. As this was an elective course focusing on "Oral English," perhaps the expectation of the students was that this was a class to engage in conversational activities in class that would require little outside homework. Informal interviews with some of the students supported

this interpretation. They expected the second-year course to be similar to their first-year course, which required little homework and no listening homework. In Group B, which included students of mixed ability level, the number of assignments completed varied widely among students, and the homework load needed to be adjusted downward at midterm from 10 to 5 assignments.

Table 3 shows the number of times students listened to each audio or watched each video. For Group A, the largest combined percentage was two to three times (51.5%). For Group B, which was a more difficulty course, the largest combined percentage was three or more than three times (58.1%). For Group C, the combined percentage was also three or more than three times; however, this figure applied to only about three or four out of 26 students in Group C.

Table 4 shows the number of minutes students spent doing each free-choice listening lesson. The majority of students (65.0%) spent 20 minutes or less on the assignments on average and 30 minutes or less accounted for nearly 85%. These figures include both listening time and the time it took to complete writing a summary and opinion of the listening passage. The actually listening time, therefore, was considerably less than the total number of minutes.

Table 5 shows the students' overall evaluation of the Web sites they visited (all groups combined). The majority of students (95.6%) strongly agreed or agreed that the listening lessons were interesting. This result is not surprising because the students chose the sites themselves according to their personal interests. Similarly, the majority of students (95.6%) strongly agreed or agreed that they understood the contents of the lesson. It is not surprising that they chose material that fit their level of understanding. Moreover, some of the popular sites that students used had transcripts that they could read after listening. Similar results were obtained for "the speaker was easy to understand" with 77.4% of the learners indicating they agreed or strongly agreed. Informal interviews with some students

suggested that speed (speech rate) and regional accents were the reasons for their difficulty in understanding (23.6%). Although the majority of students indicated that the material as a whole was easy to understand and fit their level, near 80% of the students responded that they learned new words from the listening tasks. This suggests that the number of unknown words per task on average was small enough so as not to interfere with comprehension or that contextual cues compensated for this lack of knowledge. Accordingly, the majority of students (85.7) agreed or strongly agreed that the lesson fit their ability level, and 93.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they wanted to listen to similar lessons. Overall, these results suggest that doing free listening tasks was a positive experience for the students.

In addition to the survey data above, students wrote summaries and opinions. The summaries followed one of two formats. One format used a paragraph form and signal words (first, second, third), and the other format required the student to answer several questions (see Appendix). The opinions were guided by questions prompts but the students were free to write whatever they wanted. Below are examples of each type (errors uncorrected) from two first-year junior college students:

Paragraph type summary (Student 1): This passage was about good point of city and country. There are 2 points main idea. First, good points of country. Second, good points of city. Jeff was born in country. But he lives in city now. He introduce good points of country and city. In country, there are quiet and we can relax, listen to the birds, watch sky. We can touch nature. In city, there are a lot of enegy, a lot of people, a lot of lights, and a lot of action. So he think both have good points.
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Question prompt summary (Student 2): (1) Who are the main people in the story? The main people in this story are ANNE and STEVE. (2) When did it happen? One day STEVE ask ANNE to go to zoo with him. And they go there and look a lot of famous animals in Australia the next day. (3) Where did it happen or what places is it concerned with? It is a wildlife park in Australia. (4) What is the story about? STEVE is a SARAH's brother. SARAH is trader of ANNE. They met SARAH's home. STEVE and ANN go to zoo and look at many animals. STEVE explain her about Australian animals. ANNE want to hold a koala,so they go to cuddle koala after looking some animals. (5) Why did it happen? When ANNE eat lunch with SARAH's familly, she said she want to go to zoo. STEVE remember what she said,and he ask her to go there. (6) How did it happen? How much? How long? How far? They spent a lot of time in the zoo. [173 words]

Opinion (Student 2): When I listened the episode about lunch in SARAH's house before, I thought STEVE like ANNE. So he ask her to go to zoo together in this episode, I think, however ANNE might like him too. Because when ANNE is on the phone with STEVE,she looks happy.I am interested in thier relationship after this episode and I want them to become a nice couple. Because ANNE work very hard for her familly and looking her brother.I think she have a lot of mental problem.I want she have a boyfriend and send a happy life. [94 words]

Although many students wrote summaries and opinions similar to those above, the length and quality varied widely. Compare for example the responses of a typical lower ability (or perhaps less motivated) student in the same class:

Summary (Student 3): He talks about singing, dancing, cleaning, and do the exercise. He likes to cook vegetables. [15 words]

Opinion (Student 3): I don't like cooking. Because, I like eating! Both of vegetable and meat are delicious! I think that food is very good for our health. [25 words]

Based on discussions with the students, it became clear that the length and contents of the summaries and opinions reflected numerous variables. Some of these variables were understanding of the task, time available to complete the task, writing ability, and motivation.

During the course, there were one-to-one consultations between the instructor and the students to clear up any misunderstandings about the assignments, and to review the quality and amount of work they had completed. In these consultations, the instructor answered questions, made clear what was expected in the task, and gave advice on how the students could improve their performance. Noticeable improvement was seen in the summary and opinion writing of many students after they were show examples (anonymously) of high quality summaries and opinions written by other students. Although improving listening comprehension, not writing ability, was the aim, having to respond to what they listened to encouraged many students to listen repeatedly and with concentration.

Conclusions and Advice

Several conclusions can be draw from this action research. First, it is possible to assemble a selection of free Web sites for listening comprehension practice at different levels of ability covering a wide range of topics. These sites can be used for both extensive and intensive listening practice. Moreover, they can be used to

supplement and perhaps replace textbook lessons or for self-access, autonomous learning. Second, with teacher guidance students can successfully select materials that they find interesting and that fit their ability level. Many students in this study, however, preferred to stay with easier materials rather than to challenge themselves. When students found a site they liked, they tended to stick with it. Therefore, it may be beneficial to encourage students to try a variety of sites. Third, positive experiences with interesting sites have motivated some students to pursue extensive on-their-own practice. They listened repeatedly and widely beyond the requirement of the course aiming to achieve a high level of listening comprehension. Fourth, to engage the students in serious listening, it was helpful to have feedback activities such as brief oral reports, a listening journal, completion of a questionnaire, and the writing of summaries, descriptions, and opinions. Social interaction such as discussion with a partner in small groups was especially motivating.

In addition to the points above, several human-computer interface problems need to be mentioned. Many students do not scroll down the page and miss important features of the sites such as transcripts and quizzes. In addition, many content-rich sites have confusing interfaces. Students get lost. They do not know where to click or how to proceed. Some students do not do well on the online questionnaire because of poor typing skills. These difficulties can perhaps be overcome through explicit instruction and frequent monitoring of student behavior. Take the students to the computer room during class time and check which students are having trouble.

This project generated a rich corpus of data on student free listening activities as defined in this study. Only a part of data was analyzed and discussed above. Nevertheless, these findings indicate some possibilities for promoting improvement in listening skills through autonomous learning

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<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>
- California Distance Learning Project
<http://www.cdiponline.org/>
- CNN for Students
<http://cnnstudentnews.cnn.com/>
- English Language Listening Lab Online (ELLLO)
<http://www.elllo.org/>
- 5-minute English
<http://www.5minuteenglish.com/listening.htm>
- Lives That Make a Difference
<http://www.aetv.com/class/makeadifference/celebs.jsp>
- Living English (Australia)
<http://abcasiapacific.com/livingenglish/>
- Nobel Prize Speeches
http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/peace/video_interviews.html
- Randall's ESL Lab
<http://www.esl-lab.com/>
- Stone Soup
<http://www.stonesoup.com/main2/listen.html>
- Story Corps
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4516989>
- Student Times (Shukan ST)
http://www.japantimes.co.jp/shukan-st/english_news/opinion/opinion.htm
- This I Believe
<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=4538138>
- Video Nation
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/>
- Voice of America
<http://www.voanews.com/>

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Appendix
Online Free-choice Listening Survey

Introduction: This survey is for students enrolled in my [English Comprehension] classes. The purpose of this survey is to find out what they think of the online listening and reading lessons as well as to monitor their listening progress. Click "Next" to get started with the survey. If you'd like to leave the survey at any time, just click "Exit this survey." Your answers will be saved and kept private. As a guest, you do not need to answer any of the questions to proceed through the survey. There are nine questions

1. Write your student ID number and your full name (family name first). Example: 00-000 Tanaka, Hanako
2. Please type in: (1) The name of the site (for example, "ELLLO," "Student Times"). (2) The level (beginner, low intermediate, etc.) of the passage. (If you don't know the level, write "don't know"). (3) The title of the passage (for example, "Sisters," "Episode 1").
3. Please give your opinion of the statements below (SA=Strongly agree, A=Agree, D=Disagree, SD=Strongly disagree):

This lesson was interesting.	SD	A	D	SD
I understood the contents of the lesson.	SD	A	D	SD
The speaker was easy to understand.	SD	A	D	SD
I learned new words from this lesson.	SD	A	D	SD
This lesson fit my ability level.	SD	A	D	SD
I want to listen to or read more lessons like this one.	SD	A	D	SD

4. How many times did you listen to the audio or watch the video? (If no audio or video, skip this question.) ☐ One time ☐ Two times ☐ Three times ☐ More than three times
5. In total, about how many minutes did you spend on this lesson (listening, reading, doing exercises, checking the dictionary, etc.)? Choose the closest number: Up to 10, 20, 30, 40, 50, 60, 70, 80, 90, 100, 110, 120, More than 120
6. Write a summary or description of the listening passage. For a *summary*, use this format: "This passage was about (). There are (three) main ideas. First, (). Second, (). Third, (). The conclusion is ()." For a *description*, answer the following: (1) Who are the main people in the story? (2) When did it happen? (3) Where did it happen or what places is it concerned with? (4) What is the story about? (5) Why did it happen? (6) How did it happen? How much? How long? How far? Write your summary or description in the box below.
7. Write your opinion, reaction, or impression. Consider the following questions: (1) What is interesting about this passage? (2) What is something new that you learned? (4) How does it affect or compare to your life? (4) Do you agree or disagree? (5) What is good or bad about it? (6) What is an advantage or disadvantage? (7) What

is it similar to or different from? (8) What do you predict will happen? (10) How do you feel about it (happy, sad, shocked, etc.)? (11) What more would you like to know about this topic?

You do not need to answer all these questions. You can add your own ideas, too! Write at least 50 words. Try to give details, reasons, and examples. Use signal words such as these: *however, in contrast, on the contrary, on the other hand, moreover, furthermore, in addition, for example, in general, specifically, similarly, therefore, in conclusion*. Write your opinion, reaction, or impression in the box below.

8. Do you have any other comments or questions?

9. The teacher may want to contact you about your answers. What is your e-mail address?

Thank you! I appreciate your feedback. It is your active participation and diligent study that make this class a success! Please click "Done" (below) to save your answers. After that, you will be taken to the Web site "SurveyMonkey," which is the company that provides this software. After that, if you want to return to my home page, go to this address: <http://www.ne.jp/asahi/m/and/>

Note: The actual survey was an interactive Web page so the layout and wording are slightly different from the one above.

Table 1

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Tables

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants and Courses

Course	School	Year	Classes per week (90 min. each)	No. of classes per semester	No. of students enrolled	TOEIC range (listening)
English Comprehension 1	junior college	1st	2	26	46 (23 + 23)	375-470 (185-315)
Academic Listening	junior college	1st & 2nd	2	26	54	300-500 est.
Oral English II	univ.	2nd	1	13	26	Not available
Total participants					126	

Note: The English Comprehension course consisted of two groups of 23 students each. The courses were held on the same days but at different times.

Table 2. Number Free-choice Listening Assignments Required and Completed

	Group A (n = 46)	Group B (n = 54)	Group C (n = 26)	Total (n = 126)
Minimum number of assignment required per student	9	10 (5)	7	NA
Mean number of assignments done	8.96	6.15	1.2	NA
Total number of listening assignments completed by each group (expected number)	412 (414)	332 (270)	31 (182)	775 (866)

Notes: (1) NA = not applicable. (2) Halfway through the semester, the minimum free-choice listening requirement in the Academic Listening course (Group B) was reduced from 10 to 5 times in response to a midterm questionnaire that found that many students were having trouble keeping up with the written and listening assignments in the textbook.

Table 3. Number of Times Students Listened to Each Audio or Watched Each Video

	Group A (n = 46)	Group B (n = 54)	Group C (n = 26)	Totals (n = 126)
1 time	47 (12.7)	48 (17.0)	6 (20.7)	101 (14.8)
2 times	133 (35.8)	70 (24.8)	8 (27.6)	211 (30.9)
3 times	89 (24.0)	72 (25.5)	5 (17.2)	166 (24.3)
More than 3 times	102 (27.5)	92 (32.6)	10 (34.5)	204 (29.9)
Total responses	371 (100)	282 (100)	29 (100)	682 (100)

Note: () = percentage (rounded)

Table 4. Number of Minutes Students Spent Doing Each
Free-choice Listening Lesson

	Group A	Group B	Group C	Totals
Up to 10	158 (52.5)	76 (29.8)	6 (20)	240 (36.1)
20	111 (36.9)	66 (25.9)	15 (50)	192 (28.9)
30	69 (22.9)	58 (22.7)	5 (16.7)	132 (19.9)
40	12 (4.0)	25 (9.8)	3 (10)	40 (6.0)
50	7 (2.3)	7 (2.7)	1 (3.3)	15 (2.3)
60	7 (2.3)	13 (5.1)	0 (0)	20 (3.0)
More than 60	14 (4.7)	10 (3.9)	0 (0)	24 (3.6)
<i>Total responses</i>	301 (100)	255 (100)	30 (100)	663 (100)

Note: () = percentage (rounded)

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211 (30.9)
166 (24.3)
204 (29.9)
682 (100)

Table 5. Students' Overall Evaluation of the Web Sites They Visited (All Groups)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Response total
This lesson was interesting.	347 (47.0)	359 (48.6)	30 (4.1)	2 (0.3)	738 (100)
I understood the contents of the lesson.	308 (41.8)	374 (50.7)	53 (7.2)	2 (0.3)	737 (100)
The speaker was easy to understand.	220 (29.6)	356 (47.8)	158 (21.2)	10 (1.3)	744 (100)
I learned new words from this lesson.	203 (27.0)	393 (52.3)	149 (19.8)	6 (0.8)	751 (100)
This lesson fit my ability level.	209 (28.4)	421 (57.3)	100 (13.6)	5 (0.7)	735 (100)
I want to listen to more lessons like this one.	296 (40.0)	396 (53.5)	46 (6.2)	2 (0.3)	740 (100)

Note: () = percentage rounded