

Implementing Extensive Listening in a first year listening class

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Abstract

An important goal of the Communication Skills classes in the First Year English Program (FEP) in the Faculty of Global Communication was that students should not limit their communication in English to time spent in class. Supplementing the existing self-study element of the second quarter English class with an Extensive Listening (EL) program provided a way to do this. This paper reports on the implementation of an EL program, along with analysis of students' responses regarding their perceptions of listening text difficulty and self-rated comprehension, as well as whether they would recommend their chosen listening texts to others. The EL intervention was clearly effective in increasing the number of English listening tasks performed as part of students' self-study. Data also supports the contention that high levels of comprehension characteristic of EL can lead to greater likelihood of enjoying listening to English texts.

Keywords

Extensive Listening, narrow listening, comprehension, authentic materials, enjoyment

Introduction

In 2016, the inaugural year of Aichi Shukutoku University's Faculty of Global Communication, the first intake of students in the new faculty experienced an "All English" learning environment. This aimed to get students accustomed to using English consistently in order that they might achieve a sufficient level of mastery to prepare them for content-based as well as language classes conducted in English. One concern in the second quarter (Q2) listening class was that FEP students did not spend enough time listening to English outside of the class, and were not listening to the amounts of English required to prepare them well for such content classes in English. The self-study element of the Listening course in 2016 was limited to eight self-study units on a self-study CD the students had accompanying their textbook for the Listening class. They did not, however, have any structured part of the course to help them engage with the vast amounts of other freely available spoken English online. Some students also failed to even complete the modest amounts of available self-study as part of the course. Completion of this was graded out of ten. Whilst all students achieving A and A+ grades completed all parts of the self-study for a full ten marks, students receiving an F grade scored only 4.17 out of 10 possible points on average for completion of self-study tasks. As this was graded only on completion not accuracy, failure to listen to English outside of classroom time seemed like an important factor to be addressed

to improve performance in the listening course and to better prepare students for other classes in an “All English” learning environment.

Literature Review

Extensive Listening

Extensive listening (EL) is an outgrowth of extensive reading (ER) (Brown, 2011). ER is a concept that has existed in various guises since the 1920s, and was especially popularized in recent decades by the work of Richard Day, and his book with Julian Bamford, *Extensive Reading in the Second Language Classroom* (Bamford & Day, 1998). This book criticized an overemphasis in reading instruction on exercises and comprehension questions and laid out guidelines for ER programs based on reading a lot at a level of comprehension that allowed for enjoyable reading without the need for slow mental translation into the reader’s first language, or frequent reliance on a dictionary. As this allows for massive amounts of text to be read, various researchers have studied potential improvements in reading comprehension and reading speed (Robb and Susser, 1989). The number of repetitions of vocabulary required for acquisition is also facilitated by such easy reading and research has also found vocabulary acquisition facilitated by ER. (Cobb 2007, McQuillan and Krashen 2008, Nation 2014).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, there has been interest in whether the same massive amounts of language input can have benefits for language acquisition through listening. Waring defines EL as involving the following:

- a) listening to (or being involved in) massive amounts of text
- b) text which learners can understand reasonably smoothly
- c) high levels of comprehension
- d) listening without being constrained by pre-set questions or tasks
- e) listening at or below one’s comfortable fluent listening ability

(robwaring.org/el/what.htm)

Potential benefits that he identifies are building recognition speed, helping learners ‘chunk’, greater likelihood of enjoyment of text, a focus on understanding and interacting with the text.

Narrow Listening

Narrow listening is a form of EL. It means listening to the same topic area or genre over time (in the case of the present paper, news reports) (Brown, 2011). The goal is to build schema and vocabulary by listening narrowly. An example would be a first-year student bringing familiar schema and content knowledge to a topic in the news that they have some knowledge of through listening and reading in Japanese, and that the narrow listening gives the schematic knowledge to make listening easier as vocabulary and even structures used for reporting current affairs and news are repeated over time.

Implementing Extensive and Narrow Listening as part of a course

Mayora (Mayora, 2017) identifies a number of recommended materials for EL. These include graded-readers audio books, teacher produced recordings of conversations, monologues or interviews involving native

speakers, and various online audio/video libraries for EFL learners such as *English Listening Lesson Library Online (ELLLO)*, *Dave's ESL Café*, and *Voice of America*. Ways of integrating this in a university course to give students credit can involve use of audio journals for students to reflect on what they have listened to, or simple worksheets where the purpose is not to “test” students’ comprehension but to provide very general questions to allow them to summarize what they listened to, and provide a focus for their listening, as well as sufficient evidence for the instructor to be confident that the listening has genuinely taken place. The goal of this is to provide the minimum of constraint in the questions set, following the principle outlined above in point d) by Waring.

Methodology

Participants

Participants were Global Communication majors (n = 74) in their first year of study at a Japanese university streamed into four sections which were approximately equal in number. Students were grouped in sections by total March 2017 TOEIC scores (reading and listening). Scores ranged from 210 to 765, with a median score of 380. Listening section scores ranged from 105 to 425 with a median score of 230. ETS, the company who produce the TOEIC test, give Listening Score Descriptors for scores around 400, 300 and 200. 7 students were in the range 350-425, and therefore closest to the 400 descriptor. ETS describes these students as typically able to infer both the central idea, purpose and basic context as well as the details in both short and extended listening texts. 18 students had listening scores between 255 and 345. ETS describes test takers who score around 300 as typically needing vocabulary which is not difficult in order to understand the central idea, purpose and basic context as well as the details of a short, spoken exchange, and needing the support of repetition or paraphrase to do this in extended spoken texts, and for detailed information to come near the beginning or end of a text. Finally, 48 students had listening scores of 240 or below. ETS claims Listening scores of around 200 typically indicate that they cannot understand central ideas, purpose or basic context of short spoken exchanges and require the support of a lot of repetition and easy vocabulary in longer texts. Their understanding of detail is limited, with issues such as paraphrase, details heard in the middle of the text, and syntactically complex or negative constructions, being a barrier to understanding (ETS, 2007) . Students had also been studying in the first quarter of the academic year in a program in which all classes were conducted in English, and had thus received exposure to a vastly greater amount of spoken English between taking the TOEIC test in March and beginning EL in June.

Data Collection

Data was collected in a seven-and-a-half-week period from June 2016 – August 2016 as part of the work done for the Listening class in the First Year English program (FEP). Each section of the Listening class met 23 times in total for one hour classes on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in this period. This period is known as Q2 in the Faculty of Global Communication’s quarter system.

Worksheets

A worksheet (Appendix A) was distributed in the second lesson of the Listening course, at the beginning of the self-study listening section of the course. An orientation to each section of this worksheet, based on the one used by Mayora (Mayora, 2017) in his narrow listening project in a Colombian university. The first part of the worksheet simply required general identifying information such as student name and number, class name, video title and URL. It also asked students to identify a category of news report (e.g. world news, sport etc.). The second part of the worksheet asked for specific information about the news report. As discussed above, the goal is not to constrain the students' listening with specific comprehension questions testing the students' understanding, but to require a minimum of information that a student should be able to provide if they have i) listened to the news report as stated in the first part and ii) chosen a report suitable for the individual student to be able to understand the text smoothly with a high level of comprehension. The final part asked students about their understanding of the report, its perceived difficulty, and the number of times they listened to it, as well as whether they would recommend the report to others. Students could then take more worksheets as they completed the tasks lesson by lesson as part of homework. The minimum requirement was to complete 13 of these tasks. They also had to complete 8 self-study listening tasks set for homework from the self-study CD accompanying the textbook for the Listening class. This total of 21 listening tasks completed as self-study would give a passing grade of 7.5/12 for this part of the course. Completion of the task was verified by my checking the URL and news report title and listening to all or part of the report. The accuracy of the information was only graded in so far as I had to be convinced the student had indeed listened to the report. Errors in comprehension were neither corrected, due to time and the massive amounts of listening that the students were required to aim for, nor did such errors have any impact on the grading, which was based solely on completing the required self-study. The self-study was worth 12% of the overall grade for the course. Any tasks completed above this minimum would gain extra credit up to the maximum of 12. I did not set specific requirements for scores above 7.5 prior to the completion of this part of the course. The principle was that all additional self-study should gain extra credit with no 'ceiling' on the number of tasks to be completed for full marks. Students would be graded on a curve after seeing the results of the listening self-study. This also encouraged high-performing students in this part of the course to aim for listening to massive amounts of text rather than increasing the difficulty or challenge of texts chosen, in keeping with Waring's definition of EL.

Results and Analysis

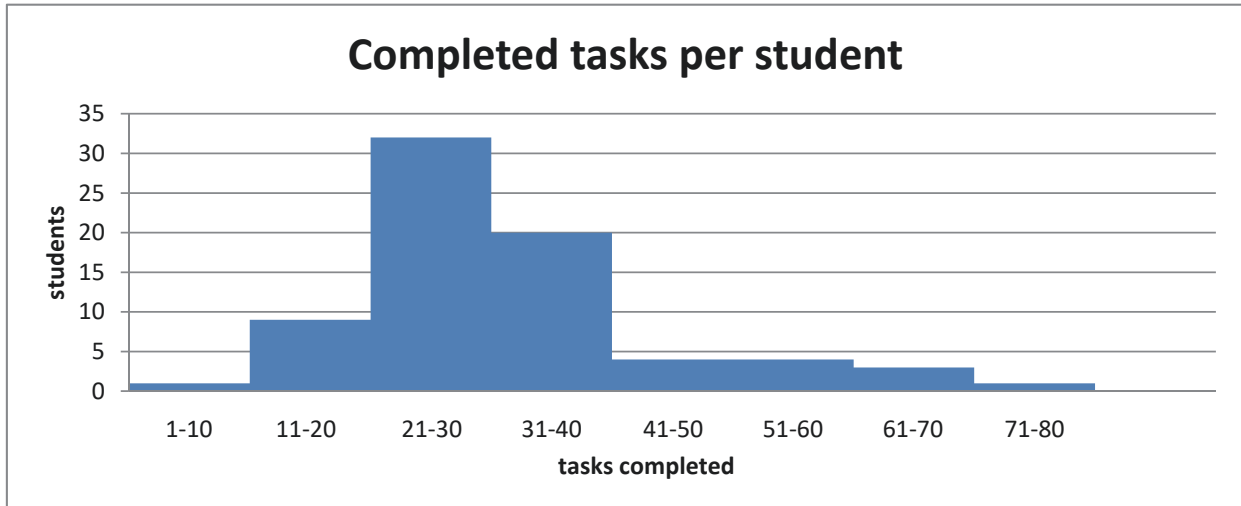
This section reports on student performance in the self-study Listening element of the course including the EL tasks. In particular the number of listening tasks completed, as well as how many times students listened to each report, student perceptions of difficulty, student perceptions of their own understanding, and the different websites that students chose for the listening tasks. This section will further look at possible relationships between these factors and the likelihood that students would recommend the report they chose or not.

EL tasks completed

In total, 2327 self-study listening tasks were completed by the 74 students in the 4 FEP classes. All completed at least some self-study tasks. This ranged between 2 and 79 tasks correctly completed. The mean was 31.45

tasks and the median was 28.5 tasks. The distribution is shown in the graph below. A clear majority (64 / 74) of students completed at least the minimum 21 listening tasks, while 12 students completed more than 40 tasks.

Figure 1: Completed tasks per student



Recommendation rates for student self-selected tasks by website

The self-selected nature of the extensive listening tasks (1791 of the 2327 self-study listening tasks), and the wide range of news reports available online, gave the students a lot of control over the type of material listened to. Therefore, it was interesting to explore various aspects of students' perceptions of the tasks they had chosen.

Table 1 gives a breakdown of the websites where students searched for reports, and the percentage of these reports that students said that they would recommend to others. This table shows that the most popular websites all had recommendation rates above 76% with a clear majority of news reports being ones that they would recommend. Videos from Reuters and CBS had much lower recommendation rates (65.22% & 55.56% respectively). This may be the reason why fewer videos were chosen from these websites than the others in the table, discounting websites which were very minor contributors (6 or fewer tasks) to the total of news reports chosen.

Table 1: Recommended reports broken down by website

Website	Recommended	Not Recommended	Total	% recommended
Breaking News English	510	155	665	76.69
YouTube	246	58	304	80.92
Learning English - VOA	226	62	288	78.47
BBC	145	28	173	83.82
News in Levels	100	16	116	86.21
CNN	82	13	95	86.32
Reuters	45	24	69	65.22
CBS	25	20	45	55.56
VOA News	5	1	6	83.33

NPR	4	0	4	100
Breaking News English - YouTube	1	2	3	33.33
NBC News	2	0	2	100
ABC News	1	1	2	50
CNN Student News	1	0	1	100
Channel One News	1	0	1	100
NHK	1	0	1	100
Japan Times	1	0	1	100

Student preferences for learner oriented or `authentic` material

Another way to consider the information in table 1 is to categorize websites as either predominantly catering to an audience of first language or otherwise highly proficient English speakers (i.e. news reports not created with a language learning audience in mind) or aimed at an audience of people learning English as a second (ESL) or foreign (EFL) language. The first category has been argued to be superior, as authentic listening practice, providing face validity to students motivated by exposure to real language and cultural knowledge as contrasted with material viewed as contrived for the benefit of language learners (Richards, J.C., 2001). In the latter category, websites such as *Breaking News English*, *VOA Learning English* and *News in Levels* often provide options such as listening at different speeds to the same news report, news reports graded at different levels of difficulty with changes in vocabulary and syntax appropriate to difficulty levels, subtitles, or an accompanying audio script. For EL, these sites have a great attraction as these adjustments are aimed at making understanding easier, facilitating the type of listening to easy materials in large quantities characteristic of EL. It was therefore interesting to see if such adjusted material was more appealing to students than that aimed at predominantly first language English speakers. Such a preference was not borne out by student responses, as both types of website had similar recommendation rates with the websites which were not graded for learners in fact achieving a very slightly higher recommendation rate (79.37% vs. 78.08%). It is also worth noting however, that reports aimed at learners of English were chosen for more self-study tasks (1072 vs 703) despite a much smaller number of sites where this type of material was available.

Table 2: Recommended reports broken down by website audience type

Website audience type	Recommended	Not Recommended	Total	% recommended
Predominantly first language English speakers	558	145	703	79.37
Predominantly ESL / EFL learners of English	837	235	1072	78.08

Students were also asked to rate their perception of the difficulty of the news report they had chosen for each listening task. A Likert-type item was used to ask students to rate reports on a five-point scale from very difficult to understand to very easy to understand. Table 3 shows the relative perceptions of difficulty of

reports from websites aimed predominantly at first language English speakers compared to those from ESL/EFL learner oriented sites. We can see that a far lower percentage of the reports from learner oriented sites (7.92% vs 14.97%) were rated very difficult to understand. Apart from this there did not seem to be large disparities in the proportion of reports rated at different difficulty levels. Indeed, the cumulative percentages of reports rated either quite easy or very easy were remarkably similar (20.28% vs 20.23%) for first language speaker oriented sites compared to learner oriented sites.

Table 3: Student perception of difficulty of news reports broken down by website audience type

Perceived difficulty of news report	Predominantly first language English speaker oriented sites	Predominantly ESL / EFL learner oriented sites
1. very difficult to understand	107 (14.97%)	85 (7.92%)
2. a little difficult to understand	238 (33.29%)	372 (34.67%)
3. neither easy nor difficult	225 (31.47%)	399 (37.19%)
4. quite easy to understand	131 (18.32%)	180 (16.78%)
5. very easy to understand	14 (1.96%)	37 (3.45%)

A similar item on the worksheet asked students to identify the degree of their own understanding of the report, as distinct from the difficulty of the material itself. The five-point scale ranged from poor to excellent. Table 4 shows a similar breakdown of student responses to this item categorized by first language speaker oriented sites and ESL/EFL learner oriented sites. Again, there did not seem to be notable differences between the two categories in terms of the distributions of tasks rated at the various points along the scale of student understanding. Over 87% of tasks using reports from both types of sites were rated by students in the middle part of the scale from OK to very good.

Table 4: Student perception of ease of understanding of reports broken down by website audience type

Perceived student understanding of news report	Predominantly first language English speaker oriented sites	Predominantly ESL / EFL learner oriented sites
1. poor	64 (8.95%)	68 (6.32%)
2. OK	209 (29.23%)	351 (32.62%)
3. good	300 (41.96%)	408 (37.92%)
4. very good	121 (16.92%)	187 (17.38%)
5. excellent	21 (2.94%)	62 (5.76%)

Students were also asked the question on each worksheet “How many times did you have to watch the video?” (although the orientation made clear that repetitions of audio news reports should be considered in the same way.) Here we do see a distinct pattern setting the learner oriented sites apart from the more mainstream news websites. A far greater proportion of the learner oriented sites had news reports where students were able to complete the task after just one or two attempts to watch or listen to the report (35.51% vs 17.47%). Comparatively, the websites aimed at an audience of highly proficient English speakers required students to listen at least four times on 55.61% of all completed tasks compared to just 35.89% for the learner oriented sites. This may give an indication that the learner oriented sites had reports graded at a level more appropriate for a high degree of learner comprehension.

Table 5: Number of times each report watched broken down by website audience type

Number of times report watched	Predominantly first language English speaker oriented sites	Predominantly ESL / EFL learner oriented sites
once (1x)	36 (4.99%)	57 (5.4%)
twice (2x)	90 (12.48%)	318 (30.11%)
three times (3x)	194 (26.91%)	302 (28.6%)
four times (4x)	167 (23.16%)	166 (15.72%)
five or more times (5+x)	234 (32.45%)	213 (20.17%)

Table 6 breaks down the recommended and not recommended responses to different news reports at different points on the scale of perceived difficulty of the report. Here we can see a clear link between ease of listening and student enjoyment of the reports. At each point on the scale of perceived difficulty from very difficult up to quite easy, there is a corresponding increase in the student recommendation rate (52.15% for very difficult reports to 91.23% for quite easy ones). The 90% recommendation rate for very easy to understand news reports slightly diverges from this pattern but it should be noted that only 50 news reports received this rating from students so it is a relatively small sample. If we group all reports rated either quite easy or very easy together, we find that 91.06% of the 358 reports are recommended. This finding is consistent with the idea of the best EL materials being both relatively easy and enjoyable for students.

Table 6: Recommendation rates of news reports at each point on scale of student perception of difficulty

Perceived difficulty of news report	Recommended	Not recommended	Total	% recommended
1. very difficult to understand	97	89	186	52.15%
2. a little difficult to understand	424	184	608	69.74%
3. neither easy nor difficult	531	76	607	87.48%
4. quite easy to understand	281	27	308	91.23%
5. very easy to understand	45	5	50	90%

The pattern that emerges of higher recommendation rates for easier to understand videos is even stronger when comparing recommendation rates to student perceptions of their own understanding of the report. In table 7 we see that poor comprehension is associated with a minority of reports being recommended (35.61%) with increases in recommendation rates at each level of comprehension up to a high point of 94.94% of all reports where students rated their comprehension excellent. This gives strong support to the idea in EL that students should choose texts that are at or below a level appropriate for their current fluent listening ability to be able to listen enjoyably and to encourage listening extensively.

Table 7: Recommendation rates of news reports at each point on scale of student perception of understanding

Perceived student understanding of news report	Recommended	Not recommended	Total	% recommended
1. poor	47	85	132	35.61%
2. OK	383	160	543	70.53%
3. good	596	97	693	86%
4. very good	271	37	308	87.99%
5. excellent	75	4	79	94.94%

Returning to the question that students responded to regarding the number of times they watched the report (see table 5 above), table 8 shows the recommendation rates categorized by number of times the report was watched to achieve completion of the task. Again, we see a pattern of higher recommendation rates being associated with reports that required fewer viewings. Reports that could be understood in order to complete the task with one viewing were recommended at the highest rate (88.17%). Unlike with reports where students rated their comprehension poor, a clear majority of reports that required at least five viewings were recommended, but at the lowest rate of 71.86% with each additional viewing in between these two extremes seeing a drop in the recommendation rate.

Table 8: Recommendation rates of news reports by number of times watched

Number of times report watched	Recommended	Not recommended	Total	% recommended
once (1x)	82	11	93	88.17%
twice (2x)	338	70	408	82.84%
three times (3x)	385	84	469	82.09%
four times (4x)	227	79	306	74.18%
five or more times (5+x)	337	132	469	71.86%

Implications and Conclusions

The maximum number of listening tasks that the students could perform as part of self-study before the implementation of EL in the Q2 course was eight. Only one of 74 students completed fewer than eight tasks in the 2017 self-study section of the Listening course. The clear majority of students completing at least the minimum 21 tasks showed a strong commitment from the students to the EL portion of the course. Moreover, with 12 students completing more than 40 tasks and one student completing 79 tasks, this activity supported students who showed a strong commitment to the ethos of an “All English” program by supporting them with opportunities to listen to large amounts of English as part of the course, and recognition of their commitment in doing so. This will lead to the author giving strong consideration to increasing the weight given to this part of the Q2 Listening course in the overall grade for the course in future.

There are a number of challenges to consider moving forward, however. Some students were not clear about the definition of an English listening self-study task. For example, a news report about a forest fire in Portugal from BBC news featuring English subtitles but with all audio on the report coming from interviews conducted in Portuguese, was submitted by multiple students in the first week of the course. Whilst subtitles were considered a perfectly appropriate support to students’ listening, they had to clearly demonstrate listening to English to be given credit for completing the task. Many news sites carried video reports embedded in news articles. For example a news story about airport disruption might feature a video of interviews with affected travelers. The news articles often contained far more information than the video report and it was clear that the completion of the worksheet had been done by reading the news article not by listening to the report. Similarly, in news reports where an accompanying script was provided, many students worksheets featured verbatim chunks of the report in the additional details section. As well as the impossibility of verifying whether the

student had indeed listened at all, this also contravenes the purpose of EL, which is emphatically not listening to copy specific words or phrases (Waring, 2011). Many of these problems had to be addressed through clarification or adjustment of what would be accepted as a completed task mid-course. Henceforth, I anticipate that it will be possible to anticipate these specific issues at the start of the course and provide clearer guidelines for students on what is considered an appropriately completed EL task.

A further avenue for additional research would be to compare Listening score gains on the TOEIC test of students completing different numbers of EL tasks during Q2. I hope to pursue this further in the future as it potentially leads further support to the use of EL in the context of this course.

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Appendix A: Worksheet

Listening Self-Study Worksheet

Watch or listen to a news report on the web and after watching it please complete the following worksheet with the required information.

Full name: _____

Student Number: EXU _____

Class name: _____

About the video

1. Please complete the following general information about the video.

Video title: _____ .

URL: _____

2. Category (**choose one** or use the “other” space if necessary):

Sports

Breaking news

Science and tech

World news

Entertainment

Other: _____

Listening for specific information

3. Complete the following chart with information from the video. If one of the questions is **not answered** in the video write **N/A**.

Where?

When?

Who?

What?

Why?

Write two or three additional details or pieces of information from the report (very briefly).

4. How difficult was this video?

Very difficult to understand	1	
A little difficult to understand	2	
Neither easy nor difficult	3	
Quite easy to understand	4	
Very easy to understand	5	

5. How many times did you have to watch the video?

Once	
Twice	
Three times	
Four times	
Five or more times	

6 Circle what you think your understanding of the video was like.

1. Poor 2. OK 3. Good 4. Very good. 5. Excellent

7. Do you recommend this video to your classmates? **Yes / No**