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Extensive Listening inside and outside the classroom

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Extensive Listening in Depth

This paper, will discuss the existing research on Extensive Listening. Extensive listening is limited in its scope now, but technology is making extensive listening more accessible. Listening strategies and listening fluency are keywords in the literature, and this submission explains how those are the cornerstone for future research.

Extensive listening came after extensive reading as an approach to improve L2 learners' listening fluency and overall listening skills. Mimicking its predecessor, which has a growing league of supporters whose view may be summed up in, "reading is best learned through reading". Extensive reading has enjoyed a wave of popularity in the ESL field during the past few years. Evidence of this can be seen in the growing number of teachers who are familiar with the benefits of using extensive reading in class. The evidence strong supports learner improvement in their word recognition skills, vocabulary, reading comprehension, fluency, and general language proficiency. A further benefit, which may be of more importance, is that learners develop a more positive attitude toward reading and language learning in general (Day and Bamford, 1998). The 'rising tide' of extensive reading has not lifted 'all the boats' in the harbor of fluency based language activities. Extensive listening (EL) has not enjoyed such a flood of popularity. EL can be defined as all types of listening activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input (Renandya and Farrell, 2011). One of the primary aims of Extensive Listening is to improve listening fluency. Listening fluency can be defined as, 'the speed of recognition of words and grammar in a listening text' (Waring, 2008).

Students may learn through extensive listening by gaining automatic recognition of the L2 by listening smoothly to vocabulary and grammar that can be quickly processed.

Waring mentions some guidelines for choosing listening material that is appropriate for extensive listening. Some of the qualities of the content should be:

1. Over 90% of the *content* should be easily understandable
2. Over 95-98% of the *vocabulary* and *grammar* should be understandable
3. Understandable without having to stop or pause the listening text
4. The listener should be enjoying the listening material.

(Waring, 2008)

Listening with over 90% of the content understandable will afford the learner to focus on the content. Students may hear the intonation of the spoken words and may now have the cognitive margin to notice prosody and other features of the text to further their listening skills.

The aim of extensive listening is not the explicit learning of vocabulary and grammar through listening, but as a result of listening to texts, new or repeated, learners will be introduced to grammar and vocabulary many times and may learn implicitly through context and have a greater opportunity to meet the word and grammar structure again and again.

The listening text should be understandable without the hindrances of the competition of other sounds, and the recording should be clear and free of distractions. Most devices that learners will use have the ability to pause, repeat, and play again a passage in quick succession. The typical extensive listening passage should not require a second listening for comprehension. However, the ability to pause and play, and repeat, if necessary, may be a strategy a learner can apply to the one or two parts of the passage that may elude comprehension. This could support the learner's bottom-up processing and aid in the next occasion the structure or vocabulary is met (Alm, 2013).

Intrinsic motivation plays a role in an extensive activity. A learner's background knowledge in the subject will help them keep with listening. That same knowledge will also make the cognitive load lighter as they may know more of the vocabulary and themes of the topics in the listening text.

Some of the differences that separate extensive listening from extensive reading are the different barriers learners face when challenged with listening versus problems they do not encounter reading. Some of the hurdles that learners face with listening texts are:

1. Speech is too fast at normal native speeds
2. Speech is variable within passages
3. Word boundaries are blurry
4. Speech needs to be processed in real time by the learner.

(Renandya and Farrell, 2011)

Increases in speech rates are directly correlated with the decrease in successful comprehension. Beginning English language learners are not able to comprehend native speakers at normal speeds and must find listening texts that match their listening comprehension speed. Speech rate is the strongest determiner for problems listeners may face when listening to texts. Speech that is too fast will lead to distractions, lack of comprehension of known vocabulary, misses of subsequent input, and finally to anxiety and frustration (Zeng, 2007 cited in Renandya and Farrell, 2011).

It is difficult for a speaker to stay at a constant rate and consistent pronunciation throughout a passage. Doing so would not be authentic. Speech is variable within passages as the speaker uses intonation to express emotion or sounds are added or dropped by the speaker. Words spoken individually sound different from when those same words are spoken in conjunction with other words in a phrase or sentence. Phonemes are added, dropped, or modified by the interlocutor, most times unbeknownst to them. ‘Good’ and ‘day’ said together, may sound to the listener as “g’dai”.

In speech, words tend to blend with the surrounding words, thus making it difficult to clearly perceive the boundary between words. This, of course, adds to the processing burden of the learner (Renandya and Farrell, 2011). This problem is not faced with reading as the blank, open spaces between words create boundaries.

In reading, a learner may go back to the sentence before, and read it again, and again, if necessary to comprehend the reading text. Renandya and Farrell cite Bacon (1989) pointing out that “the learner may approach the listening task with more affective baggage: the speech signal may cause the hearer added apprehension since it cannot be touched or held the way a written text can.” In listening, the learner has little control over the speed of the speaker. Words come and go, and it is difficult to go back to it. These four factors differentiate listening from reading.

Vandergrift and Goh’s (2012) metacognitive approach to extensive listening provides a useful framework for out of class L2 listening within an instructional context (Alm, 2013). We can see that from their research, second language learners require constant guidance and support to face up to the challenges of extensive listening with authentic listening texts.

A principle the cognitive approach espouses is that L2 listeners are expected to be exposed to a wide variety of listening texts, with repetition. ‘Learners should listen to as many different types of authentic texts as possible, on a wide variety of themes and topics (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012). Different types of texts equates to differing themes, language usage, and contextual vocabulary. Various themes of

listening texts will keep the learner's motivation higher with texts catering to their interests and the ability to explore new topics. Different types of language usage will introduce the learners to language used by different speakers, with various inflection usage, conversational speeds, academic content, and possible world Englishes. Different topics of listening texts will contain vocabulary of the specific field, mixed in with the comprehensible content, will help students learn vocabulary using listening strategies taught in class. Listening competence comes from the combination of these strategies (Vandergrift and Goh, 2012).

Students should spend enough time engaging the listening texts to consider the activity, extensive. Learners could be tasked with spending enough time listening to change their cognitive strategies with the longer time on task. Their listening strategies will continue evolving and eventually improve their listening fluency. Instructors need to have students spend enough time on the listening texts. This will lead to the assignment of a larger homework load, which may be a de-motivator as students are averse to spending copious amounts of time on work out side of class.

Thoughts on gaps in the literature

Extensive listening is still in its infancy. Its theoretical framework is underdeveloped: there has been a lack of hard evidence supporting the effects of extensive listening on improving L2 listening competence (Chang and Millett, 2014). Some of the gaps in the literature include the effects or limitations of technology. Each passing year the advances in technology antique previous studies using technologies that were state of the art at their time. New advances in recording technologies, smartphones, and the Internet itself make portable technologies so much more of a powerful learning tool than ever before. Students now have access to more listening software, apps, and dedicated websites than those available just a few years ago. Websites catering to ESL students are expanding with user interfaces ever improving. Podcasts are becoming increasingly varied reaching many audiences and the ESL learner has many more choices. Before, most podcasts were produced by native speakers, for native speakers, but now there is a plethora of podcasts aimed at the second language listener. A few years ago, learners who attempted to listen to podcasts may have had to deal with authentic audio texts, which would be above of their ability to understand 90% of the content. Struggling to understand such difficult podcasts would have been de-motivating. Now, websites such as www.ello.org have authentic listening texts for all levels of ESL learners. Websites and podcasts are mostly free of charge. This may make it more accessible to learners and educational institutions because of the low cost and price/performance factors.

However, there are some paid sites that are also worth an investment for students. Sites like English Central, www.englishcentral.com, have a full array of features to serve the learner. Not only focusing on the listening aspect, these sites have videos which provide extra support for the learner. www.youtube.com maybe another avenue for students to learn from videos free of charge, as people who wish to teach, use YouTube as medium to post instructional ESL videos.

Many researchers draw on the benefits of extensive reading and extend them over to extensive listening. However, there is a different skill set used in listening versus reading. Although both focus on content and learners' interest in the texts, cognitively, the way learners read differs from how they listen. Some earlier literature propose that listening to the spoken text audio CDs of extensive reading books while reading them would help learners by receiving "automatically benefit from double the quantity of input." (Stephens, 2011). Is that the case where students receive double the benefits, from reading and listening at the same time, or are there diminishing returns for doing both at the same time? Could there be bad habits developed? Could students become lazy readers, not relying on their inner reading voice, but the CD to read to them? One such study done by Chang and Millett (2014) showed that the group of students who read and listened to the passage had the highest performance in comprehension, and that skill transferred over to the next listening activity. In the end, they concluded that 'abundant input' was the biggest factor in improving listening fluency. There needs to be more research on the differing benefits of extensive listening versus extensive reading, and we cannot assume that there will be similar benefits and uptake. Educators and researchers should not be beguiled by the catchword 'extensive' and treat each as the same.

As with intensive listening (narrow span with higher speed and more difficult vocabulary), how much of the class should be allocated to listening strategies? As foundational tenent, comprehensible input, enjoyable texts, lots of practice, and 98% coverage of vocabulary and grammar forms are espoused throughout various articles in the field. What part does the teaching of listening comprehension skills and strategies, features of spoken language, and connected speech have in the extensive listening classroom?

Conclusion

Extensive listening can be as simple and low tech as a teacher reading to students from a picture book for an extended amount of time. There is no excuse for teachers and researchers today to implement extensive listening with the numerous resources online. Few researchers have delved into extensive listening and the field lacks the inquiries into the intricacies of acquiring listening fluency

through extensive listening that have covered extensive reading. To better understand the effects of extensive listening and how to create a teaching program which can further increase listening fluency, further investigation is necessary, but with progress in web-based learning sites, such research should not be out of reach.

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