

Comparing the outcomes of online listening versus online text-based tasks in
University-level Italian L2 study

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Abstract

In this paper, we describe an initial exploratory study designed to compare the outcomes of online listening and online text-based tasks in the context of the study of Italian at The University of Melbourne. Our findings allow us to characterise online listening and online reading as a qualitative difference between deep and surface approaches to learning. Online listening seems to promote an integrative orientation and heighten students' desire to deconstruct and understand texts. There also appears to be higher vocabulary acquisition and knowledge retention with online listening tasks.

1 Introduction

Rubin and Thompson (1994) assert that “[l]istening, quite possibly, is the most important of the language skills, since people spend approximately 60% of their time listening” (1994:85). While the cardinal position of listening as one of the key linguistic abilities is clearly recognised, this is not reflected in research on listening. Vandergrift (1997, 1999, 2006) has repeatedly called attention to this fact. He notes most recently, for instance, that “[t]he extent to which listening ability in a second language (L2) is a function of the transfer of first language (L1) listening abilities or of L2 proficiency has not heretofore been examined” (Vandergrift 2006:6). In an earlier contribution, he described listening, conceptualised as a reception strategy, as the “Cinderella of communication strategies; [it has] received little research attention” (Vandergrift 1997:494). Similarly, there is a notable lack of research which explores the effects online listening may have on L2 proficiency and, of particular relevance to the present study, cross-modality effects, i.e. effects of listening on other linguistic abilities such as writing or speaking. Clearly, this is due to relatively recent developments in technology which facilitate access to online audio materials and to tools which allow for straightforward creation of learning tasks (see Rizzi and Absalom 2007).

Cross-modality effects on second/foreign language competency, which refer to the impact one type of task can have on different linguistic abilities (e.g. how a reading task affects oral proficiency), have emerged as an issue in the last ten years with a strong focus on the relationship between online text-based activities (either synchronous – chatrooms or asynchronous – email exchanges) and face-to-face oral interaction. Studies have described the following positive types of effects of the online environment:

- students produce more language online than in face-to-face situations (Abrams 2003; Absalom and Pais Marden 2004; Kern 1995; Pais Marden and Absalom 2004; Warschauer 1996);
- the language produced online is often more complex and/or more grammatically accurate than that produced in face-to-face interaction (Absalom and Pais Marden 2004; Böhlke 2003; Kern 1995; Pais Marden and Absalom 2004; Warschauer 1996);
- student motivation to learning improves due to the incorporation of CMC activities (Beauvois 1992; Chun 1994; Kern 1995; Warschauer 1996);
- online communication removes social barriers and provides greater equity of participation compared to classroom contexts (Absalom and Pais Marden 2004; Chun 1994; Freiermouth 2001; Kern 1995; Roed 2003; Sproull and Kiesler 1991; Warschauer 1996);
- student autonomy and responsibility for learning increases (Absalom and Pais Marden 2004; Pais Marden and Absalom 2004; Stockwell 2003).

With asynchronous text-based CMC it is important to note that students have ample opportunity to both compose and revise their responses, with the assistance of other resources including more proficient language users, than is the case either in synchronous text-based CMC or face-to-face (FTF) interactions. This would clearly have an impact, *ceteris paribus*, on complexity, quality and quantity of these interactions.

Other studies present findings which paint a more salutary picture of online versus FTF learning environments. Abram (2003) finds no significant differences lexically or syntactically between student outputs in face-to-face and online (synchronous and asynchronous) text-based CMC environments. A number of (non-language) studies

show no differences in learner outcomes based on comparison between face-to-face and online contexts. Johnson, Aragon, Shaik and Palma-Rivas in their study of learner satisfaction and learning outcomes concluded that while “student satisfaction with their learning experience tends to be slightly more positive for students in a traditional course format...there is no difference in the quality of the learning that takes place” (2000:44). Similarly, Neuhauser affirms that “equivalent learning activities can be equally effective for learning for online and FTF groups” (2002:111).

1.1 Relationship of literature to current project

The current study examines the differences between online listening versus online reading tasks. As such, it does not deal explicitly with CMC. However, we would claim that many of the assertions made above in relation to the online environment of CMC are relevant to the results of our preliminary study. Of particular relevance are claims regarding increased motivation and participation by participants. We discuss below heightened motivation of members of the listening group.

2 The current study

2.1 Design

Our exploratory study included a weekly online task for six weeks as well as pre- and post-study elements and took place between June and August 2006. The pre- and post-study elements involved a short interview and written piece both in Italian. The overarching topic for the project was *la cucina italiana* (Italian cuisine). We chose to limit the topic in an attempt to control lexical field and semantic camps with the aim of and making changes in language proficiency (eg. the uptake of specific vocabulary or adoption of specific grammatical constructions) more immediately evident.

The weekly tasks were based on excerpts of Italian radio programs sourced from the national broadcaster's (the RAI) website as archived audio materials

(www.radio.rai.it) and captured using *iRecordMusic*. Through a project entitled *Multimedia in Languages Teaching and Learning* (MiLTaL) funded by the Faculty of Arts at The University of Melbourne, we were able to catalogue around 200 radio programs according to theme, grammatical content, and level of difficulty. Apart from clipping the files to the length of desired segments and reducing the bandwidth to facilitate online use, the audio files were not edited. They therefore represented authentic, non-didacticised texts (see Kramersch 1993 for discussion of authenticity in languages teaching and learning). In the Australian context, a higher education institution must opt into the statutory licensing scheme for copying and communication of broadcasts, contained in Part VA of the Copyright Act, by giving a remuneration notice to *Screenrights* (www.screen.org). Copies do not infringe copyright provided they are made solely for the educational purposes of the University which was the case in our study (see Rizzi and Absalom 2007 for further discussion. Information on copyright is summarised from http://www.unimelb.edu.au/copyright/information/guidelines_av.html).

The tasks were designed using a purpose-built software tool called WebWiz developed by the Horwood Language Centre at The University of Melbourne (webwiz.hlc.unimelb.edu.au). The following description of WebWiz is found on its homepage: “WebWiz is a system designed to enable teachers to easily create and publish media-embedded online lessons, exercises and tests, both self-marking and assessable”. WebWiz facilitates the archiving and cataloguing of multimedia objects which can then be accessed to form the central “text” of online tasks.

We established two distinct online group sites where students could access their weekly tasks using the Education Network Australia (EdNA Online groups.edna.edu.au). EdNA is an online community which freely offers a range of

online systems (groups, discussion lists, etc.) to education institutions in Australia. Students had to register with EdNA groups and then join the specific group. They only had access to their group and were not able to access the tasks for the other group.

2.2 Participants

Participation in the project was voluntary and based on self-nomination. We issued a call for expression of interest at the end of our first teaching semester to students in Italian across all levels, except *ab initio*. We excluded the *ab initio* students as we judged that after only one semester of instruction their linguistic skills would not have allowed them sufficient access to the tasks. 14 students responded to the expression of interest and were divided into two groups: online listening group and online text-based group. The underpinning notion of the division into two groups was to balance the spread of levels across the two groups. All participants were native speakers of English, 12 were currently enrolled students while 2 were in their final semester of study. The currently enrolled participants were aged between 18 and 23 years of age. The two participants who had finished a Diploma of Modern Language in Italian at the end of first semester 2006 were over 30 years of age. The breakdown of participants by level and group was as follows.

Table 1. Breakdown of participants by language level and group

	Italian part 1	Italian part 2	Italian part 3	Completed diploma
Listening group	2	4	1	1
Text group	1	3	1	1

2.3 Tasks

The tasks were designed to be as similar as possible in content with the modality of the text used being the defining difference. Tasks were designed as individual webpages. The listening group task webpages contained an mp3 file of the radio segment in question followed by questions while the text group was provided with a written transcription of the same clip followed by the same questions. The written transcriptions were broad and therefore did not contain representations of pausing, laughter, false starts, etc. They were transcribed as text equivalents of spoken texts. Short answer comprehension questions and multiple choice questions were given each week. In addition, participants completed an evaluation of the task each week. Listening segments were no longer than 5 minutes and, based on our experience, we estimated that participants would be able to complete each task in under 30 minutes. Participants had a week in which to complete each of the online tasks and its evaluation.

Details of weekly tasks are included in the following table:

Table 2. Summary of weekly tasks

Week	Clip and topic	Audio clip length	Text clip word count	Program	Date broadcast
1	An overview of fastfood in Italy including an interview discussing the history of McDonalds in Italy	2:52	381	La Notte di Radio Uno	22-11-2005
2	A monologue description of the regional dish <i>la fiorentina</i>	1:28	191	L'Italia che va	21-10-2005

	(steak alla fiorentina)				
3	An interview with a renowned Italian chef with restaurants in America. The discussion looks at the past, present and future of Italian culinary trends abroad	3:18	496	Baobab: l'albero delle notizia	13-03- 2006
4	A discussion about pasta and its exportation abroad	1:56	305	L'Italia che va	20-05- 2005
5	An interview on the history of the <i>Slow food</i> movement	3:25	543	Fahrenheit	07-12- 2005
6	Talkback programme discussing frozen food	4:03	664	La radio ne parla	15-09- 2005

2.4 Data

Participants completed an initial information sheet which detailed their language learning background and also provided a self-evaluation of their linguistic abilities. Pre- and post-study oral interviews were recorded using a digital recorder and transferred to computer. They were then transcribed. Transcriptions in this case were narrow and included pauses and corrections. Similarly, pre- and post-study written exercises, which participants completed by hand, were also entered into electronic files. We opted for hand-written responses to track students' corrections and avoid interference from spelling and grammar checkers. These form one set of data.

Participant responses to the online tasks were archived automatically by WebWiz and form a second set of data. Similarly, weekly evaluations of tasks were automatically archived and form our final set of data.

3 Results

Preliminary analysis of our data sets allows us to group our results into three categories:

- Differences between groups
- Task-related issues
- Impact

3.1 Differences between groups

We can identify a series of qualitative differences between the text group and listening group. The overwhelming conclusion we have reached is that, at least in our study, online listening tasks strongly promote an integrative and deep approach to learning while online text-based tasks have the opposite effect. The table below summarises the diverse attributes of these two approaches.

Table 3. Approaches to learning (adapted from Thorpe 2002; see also Ramsden 2003 for detailed discussion of these two approaches)

Deep approach	Surface approach
<p><i>Intention:</i> to understand material</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relates ideas to prior knowledge experience • Adopts a creative approach 	<p><i>Intention:</i> to cope with the task</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sees task in isolation • Relies on memorisation

In the table which follows we present examples of strategies/behaviours which exemplify these diverse approaches to learning.

Table 4. Keyword approach versus skimming

Listening Deep approach	Text-based Surface approach
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a) Keyword approach	a) Skim for answers
<p><i>engagement with topic:</i></p> <p>"i tried googling Mcdonalds to find extra info"</p> <p><i>engagement with language:</i></p> <p>"I used a dictionary to confirm the meaning of the word "borgo" and then to help derive the word "adegua" in the transcription, which initially sounded to me something like (using english phonetics) "a degway". At first I thought the italian may be "ha" followed by a past participle beginning with "deg", but after searching unsuccessfully for words in the italian beginning with "deg" to try and find the meaning, I realised it may be a single word starting with "adeg" and then I found it."</p> <p><i>striving for understanding:</i></p> <p>listening "A LOT - i listened to some sections up to 10 times".</p>	<p><i>superficial task orientation:</i></p> <p>“it’s so easy to just skim read to relocated [sic] keywords ...however it’s easy to miss keywords like “non” and “e” which can change the answer to the question”</p>

In these examples we can see a profound difference between the strategies employed by the listening group and those utilised by the text-based group. Listening as a linguistic activity is clearly “a very demanding task” (Farrell and Mallard 2006:338) which sees students adopting a much wider arsenal of strategies than in a text-based

setting. The sheer effort involved in striving to understand can be seen as an index of the relationship to retention and deep learning when compared to the skimming activity described in the text-based task. Listening group participants describe activities which take them outside the text in an effort to reach understanding, eg. googling McDonalds and using a dictionary. After each task, participants were asked to stipulate whether they had made recourse to such reference materials or web searches to complete the task. Notably, not one single text group participant indicated having gone outside the task in any week. Our conclusion is that languages students have a higher degree of confidence with written texts, lower levels of anxiety and therefore are less concerned about lapses in understanding. An alternative point of view could suggest that since students are more familiar with written text they have already developed learning strategies and simply rely on these. Listening tasks, however, trigger higher levels of anxiety and a stronger desire to *deconstruct* the text in order to reach understanding. This brings us to a non-trivial conclusion: more systematic incorporation of listening tasks could have positive implications for language acquisition.

Table 5. Deep vs Surface approach

Listening Deep approach	Text-based Surface approach
a) more creative orientation, add real world knowledge - points to integrative learning	a) lift text for answers, less creativity and no reference outside text - strong task orientation
<i>Attempts to make sense:</i> “quattro mesi dopo” (four months later) for “qualche mese dopo” (some months later)	<i>lifting without understanding:</i> “il cibo della discordia” (the food of discord) = synonym for “fast food”

<p><i>Improvised answers:</i></p> <p>“Come va cotta la fiorentina secondo la tradizione culinaria fiorentina?” (How must you cook the <i>fiorentina</i> according to Florentine culinary tradition?) –</p> <p>“viene cotta con un pezzo di carne piu’ denso – quindi lo spessore dev’essere piu’ grande” (It is cooked with a denser/thicker piece of meat – so the thickness must be greater) – not given in audio passage</p> <p>“Il brano descrive due caratteristiche positive del fast food. Quali sono?” (The passage describes two positive characteristics of fast food. What are they?)</p> <p>- “e’ un luogo dove si puo` festeggiare i compleanni di bambini” (It’s a place where you can celebrate children’s birthdays) – not found in the audio passage</p>	<p>“la fiorentina”</p> <p>= Florentine cuisine (2/6 readers)</p> <p>= Florentine meals (1 reader)</p> <p>= “costata di manzo ai ferri” (all listeners) (correct)</p>
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As noted above, text group participants display an overwhelming task orientation and a strong tendency to remain within the text which is likely the effect of their previous learning experiences. Efforts to understand the meaning of the text are at times minimal leading to misinformation (as highlighted in table 5) and answers were often

inaccurate yet based closely on the text. Listening group participants displayed characteristics of integration and creativity in their responses, often drawing on their own experiences to respond to questions rather than remaining faithful to the text given. Notably, this is in stark opposition to what Vandergrist (2006) found where his students were “unaware that they could draw on non-linguistic knowledge resources (e.g., world knowledge) to compensate for inadequate L2 linguistic knowledge” (2006:14). In our study, listening students were activating their real world knowledge in order to make sense of the text. Text group participants, on the other hand, remained tied the text and were satisfied with inaccurate or inadequate answers and therefore understanding of the text.

3.2 Task-related issues

Two task-related issues emerged as relevant to our findings. First, written conventions (eg. use of capital letters) made it easier for the text group participants to identify culturally-specific information while the listening group participants had to rely solely on their knowledge. The implication is clear for the use of authentic listening texts: students will require *scaffolding* of their culture specific knowledge in order to satisfactorily interact with non-didacticised listening texts. This could involve activities which require students to carry out preliminary research activities on the topic of the audio files to be studied. Alternatively, culture specific vocabulary might be flagged or glossed.

Table 5. Written conventions identifying culturally specific information

Text group	Listening group
“Burgby” identified as an Italian fast food restaurant by 5/6 readers	“Burgby” not identified by any listener. Attempts at <i>decoding</i> included the phonetically close <i>borghi</i> which refers to

	suburbs of a city
“Sole 24 ore” identified as the name of a newspaper by 4/6 readers	“Sole 24 ore” not identified by any listener.

Second, in our study it became evident that there was an optimal period of repetition for the types of tasks we employed. In the case of the listening group, by week 3 participants had become much more comfortable with a high degree of interest still remaining in week 6. The following participant quotation confirms this:

"I think i am starting to get used to I'm picking up on little things that i wouldn't have picked up on in the first week (techniques on how i listen.' Also the speed of the audio isn't disturbing me as much-i dont know if this is due to my own improvement or if perhaps the audio was a bit slower. Maybe a bit of both i guess."

By contrast, the text group had lost motivation by week 6 as demonstrated by comments such as "was a bit lazy and didn't take the time to translate it properly".

Laurillard (2006) discusses the need to vary tasks in order to maintain learner motivation. Given our claim that listening promotes a higher level of learner anxiety and lower level of confidence we suggest that it seems that listening tasks may not need to be varied to the same degree as is the case with text-based tasks. The continued engagement with the listening tasks as opposed to the text-based tasks confirms our hypothesis that the former are more psychologically taxing on students which leads to higher levels of motivation.

3.3 Impact

Our initial findings point to a relationship between listening tasks and retention of information or vocabulary. In the post-test oral interview, all listening group participants were able to provide a concise summary of the history of McDonalds in

Italy - this had been the topic of the first weekly task. One text group participant had no memory of having studied the history of McDonalds in Italy while other text group participants could only describe one or two related facts but without the cohesion or chronological order displayed in the oral accounts of listening group participants. We asked participants to describe any regional dishes that they had learnt about during the project. Again, text group participants were unable to name any dish. 3 listening group participants nominated *la trippa* “tripe” while 1 listener was able to list 3 dishes. We would contend, then, that the online listening tasks have led to greater retention of information than the online text-based activities. This confirms Vandergrift’s assertion of the “important role of vocabulary development...in L2 listening proficiency” (2006:14). Indeed, Mercartty (2000) asserts that “only vocabulary knowledge was a significant predictor of L2 listening comprehension ability”.

4 Limitations of the study

Clearly, the major limitation of our initial study is the size of the sample. However, we contend that our results indicate that further research is warranted to explore the cross-modality effects of online listening.

A second issue relates to the language in question. It may be the case that with other languages, perhaps those with a larger index of difference - either phonologically or orthographically - from the native language of the participants, listening outcomes may diverge. Similarly, with a more heterogenous group of participants, both in terms of language background (all of our participants spoke English as their first language) and language learning experience, we would predict more divergent results.

5 Conclusion and future directions

In this paper we have described an initial exploratory study aimed at comparing the effects of online listening and online text-based tasks. From this we conclude that online listening tasks have the following effects:

- due to the complex nature of listening in L2, online listening tasks in L2 require students to activate more learning resources than is the case with text-based tasks and adopt a deep, integrative approach to learning
- due to this approach to learning, online listening tasks in L2 can lead to greater retention of information and vocabulary
- this greater retention of information and vocabulary can lead to noticeable cross-modality gains. For instance, listening group participants were better equipped to respond orally to questions about the content of the weekly tasks than text group participants.

At the time of writing, we have not yet completed a full analysis of all our data. Our next step will be to examine the written and oral pre-study and post-study exercises for evidence of gains in grammatical features. We will also analyse these texts in terms of complexity to determine whether there are any group related effects.

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