

A Review of the Listening and Pronunciation Website *EnglishCentral*

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リスニングと発音練習ウェブサイト *EnglishCentral* についての考察

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Summary

This paper reviews the popular listening and pronunciation website *EnglishCentral*. After first providing an overview of the main features available to learners, the author evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of various aspects of the activities offered by consulting previous research and current principles related to language acquisition, vocabulary learning, shadowing, attention, and motivation. Overall, the website provides a well-organized library of listening material paired with useful tools for language learners. However, further empirical research needs to be carried out to determine the best practices for using the website and to compare the tasks offered with alternative approaches to language study.

Keywords: CALL, listening, pronunciation, motivation, speech recognition

要 旨

この論文は、リスニングと発音練習サイト *EnglishCentral* についての考察である。初めに学習者が使用出来る主要な機能を要約した後、これらの機能を様々な角度から検証し、語学習得、語彙学習、復唱、注意力や意欲に関する先行研究と最近の主要な論考を参照しつつ、その長所と短所について評価する。総合的に見れば、このウェブサイトは、語学学習者に対して、有効な手段と共によく整備されたリスニングの教材を提供していると言える。しかし、今後の実験に基づいた研究により、このウェブサイトの一番効率的な使い方を確立する事と、語学学習の為のその他の方法とこのウェブサイトの有効性を比較する事が必要である。

キーワード: CALL、リスニング、発音、意欲、発音評価システム

Introduction

One of the greatest challenges for foreign language learners is finding opportunities to practice listening and speaking skills outside of the classroom. The Internet provides access to an immense collection of video material that can be used as authentic listening texts, however, learners, overwhelmed with choices, may have difficulty finding material that is appropriate for their level or particular language goals. Furthermore, beyond simply listening to the videos, learners are left on their own to study the language they encounter with little or no support, and maintaining motivation may prove difficult. Teachers wishing to give their students more practice with listening and speaking outside of the classroom may struggle to find videos that are appropriate for their students, and then spend hours creating activities for their students to get the most out of the videos they have selected.

Recent efforts to gather and develop video materials that are both interesting and appropriate for language learners, combined with improvements in speech recognition technology, have resulted in some truly exciting advances in online self-study websites for language learners. However, before committing the time and money required to subscribe to one of these services, it is important to look at the theoretical basis for the activities offered. This paper seeks to take such a look at one of the most popular online listening and speaking websites, *EnglishCentral* (www.englishcentral.com).

Overview of the website

EnglishCentral is a commercial website that was started in 2009 by a team of entrepreneurs from the fields of language education and Internet technology. What began as a rather simple website that utilized language recognition software to provide often unreliable feedback on pronunciation as learners watched and then repeated lines from a modest collection of video clips, has grown to become one of the most widely used Internet-based CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning) systems available, with an extensive collection of videos and a variety of language learning tools, including listening and shadowing activities, detailed pronunciation monitoring and feedback, as well as structured vocabulary practice. These resources are organized around four basic steps: watching a video, learning the words in the video, speaking the lines of the video, and taking quizzes on the vocabulary from the video.

Watching a video

EnglishCentral maintains a library of over 100,000 video clips, which range in length from 30 seconds to 3 minutes. Many of the videos were taken from content that is freely available under

fair-use guidelines, such as movie trailers, television commercials, and excerpts of public speeches, while others have been created by the company using actors, and cover notional-functional situations for travel, business, and social interaction. Users of the site can search for videos by topic or key word, or they can select a course, which is a collection of videos centered on a theme or goal. However, in this age of YouTube and other video websites, what makes *EnglishCentral* unique is the language learning tools that accompany each video.

Of particular interest to language learners, the videos in *EnglishCentral*'s library are all graded into one of three levels based on the difficulty of the vocabulary contained in the video: Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced. Each video in the library has also been captioned in English, and as the video plays the matching text appears. Learners can mouse over any word in the video to hear the word spoken again. When the word is clicked on, a pop up window appears with an English definition of the word, another sentence that makes use of the word, and the phonetic symbols for each sound in the word. Many of the videos are also subtitled in other languages, in particular Japanese and Chinese. Subtitles appear automatically based on the native language the user has chosen, but can be turned off from the settings menu. After watching the entire video, the user is awarded experience points and then the next portion of the lesson begins automatically.

Learning the words in the video

Certain lines of each video have been selected based on target vocabulary and are used for the next activity, which aims to increase familiarization with target words that are deemed appropriate for the learner's level. A line of the video is played again but with one word not appearing in the caption. The user is prompted to type in the missing word, and receives confirmation if the word is typed correctly. If the learner types an incorrect response, the website displays the target word with its definition and then plays the line again and provides another opportunity to type the correct word. After making it through all of the target words, the user is taken to the next stage of the lesson.

Speaking the lines of the video

Utilizing the same lines of the video that were studied in the previous activity, learners begin shadowing the video, speaking into the microphone of their computer or mobile device. After each line is spoken, the website's voice recognition software evaluates the learner's pronunciation of the words in the video segment and awards a score and comment, such as "Good job!" or "Perfect!" Users then can see the same line of the video with each sound coded by color according to how closely their pronunciation matched the website's database: green for correct pronunciation, yellow for problematic pronunciation, and red for unrecognizable. Learners can compare their speech to the original audio and choose to try again or continue to the next line. Upon completion of a video, the user receives an overall score for the video. At any time, learners can return to past lines and

attempt to improve their scores.

Taking quizzes on the vocabulary

The final step is to take a quiz on the target vocabulary that has appeared in the video just watched, as well as any words that the learner has encountered in previous videos. The quizzes are presented in a pop-up window, along with the original line of video containing the target word. The quiz items require the user to either select a synonym or short definition from several choices, or type the word into a gap fill-in. Words appear on quizzes using a spaced repetition approach. The system tracks the learner's progress on each word and continues to include a word in quizzes until the learner has answered it correctly on five quiz sessions.

Evaluation

EnglishCentral brings together an extensive collection of both authentic and studio-produced listening material, and offers them to learners with several useful language learning tools. First of all, it is important to clarify what “authentic” means in this case. Many of the videos on this site are clips available for “fair use,” such as television commercials, movie trailers, and public speeches. Others are short segments taken from television programs or movies. They are “authentic” in that they were not created for learners of English. However, with the exception of some clips taken from interviews, they do not represent unscripted natural speech, as it would occur in daily conversation or common notional-functional situations. Many users may find these videos engaging because they can watch their favorite Hollywood stars or learn about a topic that interests them, but the usefulness of the language in these types of videos is questionable (Guariento & Morley, 2001). Furthermore, the occasional use of non-native speakers, while something to be applauded for listening tasks, proves problematic when being used to model pronunciation both because of conflicting examples and due to a general learner preference for native-speaker pronunciation (Li, 2009).

In order to provide language examples that would be useful for common communicative purposes, the site has developed a large bank of videos that cover social, business, and travel situations. These clips are similar to what would be found in language learning textbooks, consisting of simplified dialogues spoken by actors using standard English. Students seeking clear examples of language being used in particular contexts may find these types of clips to be more appropriate for working towards their individual competency goals.

The tools that accompany each video provide various types of scaffolding and language support. First, the English-language captions can help learners to understand the video more easily. The ability to hear each word spoken individually as well as easy access to a definition and sample sentence are resources that will be welcome by many language learners. Research supports the use of bilingual definitions and marginal glosses to promote vocabulary learning (Hulstijn,

Hollander, & Greidanus, 1996; Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). Including a gap fill-in task during the lesson which tests the same target vocabulary is also in line with studies that have shown learners not only retaining target vocabulary but also displaying better productive use of new words than learners who answered comprehension questions instead of doing vocabulary practice with target words after encountering them in a text (Paribakht & Wesche, 1997). Most learners and educators alike recognize that repeated exposure to target vocabulary is necessary for acquisition. Although encountering a word as few as two times has been shown to result in improved word recognition, more repetition correlates with better retention of target vocabulary (Rott, 1999). Therefore, the use of spaced repetition of key words encountered during these activities may help learners increase their vocabulary size and depth of lexical knowledge. However, considering that most of the studies in this area were done in reading contexts, more research should be done to confirm whether glosses and spaced repetition hold the same benefits for listening tasks.

The central theoretical question with the approach *EnglishCentral* employs is whether or not shadowing a listening passage promotes language acquisition. As a user completes the “watch a video” activity and later the “speak a video” portion, no comprehension is necessarily required to complete the task and receive positive feedback from the program. Even the “learn the words” section only asks users to type in a missing word. Learners can enter the correct word without understanding the complete passage, and it is even possible to type the correct word without knowing its meaning. It is likely that intrinsically motivated learners, those who enjoy language study, will want to understand the videos that they are watching. However, for those extrinsically motivated learners, completing the task purely to earn points and achieve a grade, might complete all of the tasks without little or no attention to meaning. This is particularly problematic, as attention alone has not been shown to promote language learning; awareness of the target language is required (Schmidt, 1995). Further research needs to be conducted to determine if simply shadowing a video can result in greater speaking fluency or improved pronunciation. In response to teacher requests, *EnglishCentral* now provides printable materials for most videos that contain a script, comprehension questions, and discussion questions. Teachers who would prefer their students to be more engaged in meaning-focused tasks can utilize these resources as they see fit.

Although comprehension is not required to progress through the website’s core activities, users need to satisfy the language recognition software in order to gain points during the “speak the video” portion. The reliability of speech recognition technology has improved greatly in recent years, and over a decade ago, Wachowicz and Scott (1999) declared that the accuracy of speech recognition technology in CALL application was sufficient for effective language study, but that the nature of the task and the quality of the feedback were more important factors in determining the effectiveness of any computer-based speaking activity. In particular, they list desirable features that speech-interactive CALL programs should contain. *EnglishCentral* meets many of Wachowicz and Scott’s recommendations including implicit feedback, multimodal lessons, verification

procedures and opportunities for repair of errors, and visual support for pronunciation techniques. However, one key point that they recommend is for programs to utilize “task-based instruction with an emphasis on communicative authenticity (p. 271).” Simply shadowing speech, typing in missing words, and taking vocabulary quizzes does not resemble what most language educators would define as meaningful communicative tasks. Considering recent advances in artificial intelligence, it will be interesting to see if more communicative activities are added to *EnglishCentral* in the future.

One strength of the website is that most students seem to find it useful for their language learning and are willing to spend several hours a week using it outside of class. In a survey of 61 Japanese first-year, non-English major, college students, Ballou (2014) found that the students who had used the *EnglishCentral* website approximately three hours a week for one semester rated it as “an effective way to improve [their] English,” with an average rating of 3.6 on a 5-point Likert scale. In fact, only 13.9% of the students gave the site a negative rating.

Overall, there are several reasons that students might find *EnglishCentral* useful for language learning. First of all, it provides a great degree of choice. Learners can select the level of material they will study and spend time doing the tasks that they feel are most relevant. Importantly, the site helps them select videos with language that is appropriate for their level of vocabulary knowledge. Second, the tasks are presented using game mechanics that provide extrinsic rewards, such as positive feedback messages, points, and leaderboards, where they can compare their efforts to other learners in their class and in the world. Finally, the types of tasks available, namely listening, pronunciation, and vocabulary, combined with detailed analytics of the words they are learning and sounds they need to improve, match the types of tasks, that learners, more so than teachers, have identified as their preferred language learning activities (Jacques, 2001; Stafford, 1995).

Conclusion

Before making any decision as to the allotment of time, money, or effort in a language study program, both teachers and learners should consider the theoretical underpinnings of the product being offered in relation to language learning goals sought. *EnglishCentral* offers a wide range of listening material and has developed several useful tools to help learners get more out of these passages while staying motivated and monitoring their progress. Yet to be determined empirically are the relative effectiveness of the tasks available on the site, as well as a comparison of these activities with alternatives that may be found elsewhere. Further research is needed to shed light on these questions.

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