Extensive Listening: A new approach to an old problem

Wm. R. Holden III

Abstract

It is often said that the best way to master something is to do it regularly for an extended length of time. Whether one is learning to write kanji, read music, play a sport, master a craft, or understand another language, each process demands large amounts of time and commitment. Time on task has long been recognized as one of the most reliable predictors of success in attaining proficiency in a second language. Despite this, however, few Japanese English students receive either an adequate amount of classroom instruction or sufficient amounts of practice using the language practice to develop more than rudimentary language facility. Extensive reading (ER) and extensive listening (EL) are two means of addressing this problem. I will explain how EL is able to help learners overcome some of the barriers they face in learning a second language, examine EL for the challenges it poses L2 learners, and provide a few guidelines for instructors who wish to incorporate extensive listening as a component of a language teaching program.

Background

Helping students develop listening proficiency has always been a particularly difficult aspect of foreign language teaching, not least because listening involves of a number of complex, interrelated cognitive processes which must occur simultaneously within fractions of a second for a message to be interpreted correctly. Comprehension at a minimum relies on correctly assigning meaning to sounds, interpreting supra-segmental features such as stress, rhythm, and intonation to understand the speaker`s intended meaning, and use of background, situational, and linguistic knowledge. Because, however, listening is the principle source of foreign language input for most language learners, development of listening as a skill and as a channel for language input is of critical importance in foreign language instruction (Rost, 2001:103).

Giving prominence to the development of listening comprehension confers four advantages,

which Gary (1975) labelled cognitive, efficiency, utility and affective. The cognitive advantage of an emphasis on listening comprehension is that it follows a natural order of acquisition, reflecting the process of first language acquisition.

Related to the cognitive advantage is the efficiency advantage; language learning is more efficient if learners are not required to immediately produce large portions of the language material to which they are exposed. This allows learners to employ short-term memory to the task of deriving and retaining meaning. Furthermore, emphasizing the development of listening comprehension is more efficient because students are exposed to controlled, "comprehensible" input from various sources. Controlled listening input provides a more realistic and accessible model than peer/classmate speech.

The third advantage, the utility advantage, addresses the usefulness of receptive skills. Research by Gilman and Moody, (1984:331) has demonstrated that adults spend 40-50% of their communication time engaged in listening, 25-30% speaking, 10-15% reading and less than 10% writing. It seems logical to conclude from this that language learners will make more extensive use of listening comprehension skills than of other language skills.

The fourth advantage gained from emphasizing the development of listening comprehension is the affective, or psychological advantage. Absent the pressure of speech production, learners are able to relax and direct their attention to comprehending speech, developing listening skills, and internalizing vocabulary and structure that will facilitate the emergence of other language skills. Moreover, focussing on listening promotes a sense of success, which in turn fosters motivation to continue learning (Rubin,1988:1). This is perhaps the most salient rationale for including extensive listening activities in a foreign language program, particularly at intermediate and advanced levels.

Listening, due to its somewhat idiosyncratic nature, remains a significantly more difficult task than reading. Rather than attempting to lexically (or otherwise) grade and provide material (as is often done in extensive reading programs), the instructor should leave selection of appropriate material for EL to the individual learners, and recommend rather than require material of a more appropriate level if students appear uncertain.

Three types of knowledge comprise listening comprehension. The first, schematic knowledge is comprised of factual & socio-cultural background knowledge, and procedural knowledge, or how this knowledge is used in discourse. The second, contextual knowledge, refers to knowledge of the situation, participants, setting and purpose of the communication and knowledge of the co-text, i.e. what has & what may (and may not) be said. The third source of knowledge is called systemic knowledge, and refers to the "nuts and bolts" of language and how it operates systemically, i.e. knowledge of the phono/morphological, syntactic and semantic systems.

Authentic Material - Advantages and Disadvantages

Real-life listening is interactive, and is characterized by: a) seeking to accomplish a purpose based on certain expectations; b) making immediate responses to what we hear; c) seeing the person who is communicating; d) visual or environmental cues reinforcing the message; e) spontaneous discourse delivered in short "chunks", or units of meaning. Depending on the channel, setting or purpose of communication, various other criteria would apply. On the other hand, EL is primarily an individual activity. Nonetheless, certain characteristics of conversational listening can be replicated during extensive listening by the careful selection of material. The following factors should be taken into consideration when developing and selecting listening material. Typically, the more facilitating cues present, the more engaging the exercise, in terms of interest and motivation, and the more manageable, in terms of both cognitive load and rate of comprehension.

Factors facilitating comprehension	Factors impeding comprehension
Interest	Lack of Interest
Focused attention	Noise/ Distractions
Availability of Environmental Cues	Lack of Environmental Cues
Topic/ Genre Familiarity	Lack of Topic Familiarity
Lexical Familarity	Lexical Density
Lexical Simplicity	Lexical Complexity
Syntactic simplicity	Syntactic Complexity
Slowed Rate of Speech	Rapid Rate of Speech
Familiarity w/ Prosodic Features	Unfamiliar Prosodic Features

Brevity/ Conciseness	Increased Length
Repetition/ redundancy	Accent/dialect/colloquialism
Feedback/ confirmation	Fatigue
Visibility of the speaker/ visual info	"Disembodied" discourse
Opportunities to Interact/ Respond	Non-reciprocal" listening

Authentic input of an appropriate level of difficulty can, in addition to assisting learners in developing their listening skills, also provide realistic and entertaining linguistic and cultural input, and encourage learner involvement in ways that commercially available listening material has often failed to do. Allan (1985) observed that in material designed for language instruction, the goals of instruction take precedence over or preclude entertainment or informational value, and that learners need to have their attention consciously drawn to specific "target language" and/or structures rather than to the more general "model language".

Some of the advantages of using authentic material is that it is enjoyable and entertaining, thus increasing learners` interest; the learner controls the choice of material, level of input, length of the listening/viewing session; material of this "global" nature is inherently more memorable than listening intended to teach language, and provides a basis for conversations about real-life topics and shared experience; the content and context provoke emotional responses and promote listener involvement; as authentic material is not intended to elicit a specific response or contain "the answer", pressure to "get it right" is absent. Learners are encouraged to find and use material they find personally relevant, worthwhile and comprehensible provide an authentic window on foreign culture; e.g. "members of X culture find this entertaining", rather than "this realistically portrays life in country X".

Learners using this type of material are exposed to natural speech with natural prosodics occurring in an integrated, meaningful, context, in which the action and speech are realistic. This promotes the development of listening skills in that it promotes familiarity with some of the features of natural language which are most difficult for learners. Unfamiliar accents, dialects, regionalisms, and idioms are more easily understood when clearly tied to the development of a conversation, message, or plot.

Gestures and facial expressions assist learners in linking meaning to stress, intonation and other prosodic cues. Other visual information can help facilitate the understanding of unfamiliar language as learners have to infer and deduce to "make sense" of things.

Recall is enhanced when items are well integrated with both sensory experience and linguistic knowledge. Increased exposure to new language using a variety of means is a consistently reliable predictor of successful learning. Time spent analyzing language, associating images, feelings and personal experiences with language, and integrating newly acquired and existing language knowledge will all promote increased retention and recall. Anderson (1983) concluded that memory for concepts can be increased by increasing the number of related ideas (associations) present at either the time of learning or the time of recall, particularly if the associations are well integrated with prior knowledge. Cohen and Aphek (1980) demonstrated that learners' attempts to form associations involving target vocabulary lead to better retention, while Stevick (1976), Johnson-Laird (1983) and Brown and Perry (1991) have confirmed that integrative strategies have a positive effect on retention because words are stored in associative networks. According to Carter and McCarthy "The principle of vocabulary learning ... is that the more words are analyzed or are enriched by imagistic or other associations, the more likely it is that they will be retained" (1988:56).

In the same way that extensive reading (ER) has been shown to help successfully address problems students face in developing adequate reading speed, improving sight recognition of lexis and grammar, and improving comprehension and retention, EL should be able "to improve our automaticity in recognizing spoken text, to enjoy the listening, to practice the listening skill for knock-on effects such as tuning into pronunciation and noticing intonation patterns." (Waring, 2003)

Another obvious attraction of EL is that it combines the universally understood pleasure of listening to a good story or watching an interesting film with the satisfaction inherent in accomplishing a meaningful (as opposed to an "educational") task in the target language, while still at a relatively low level of fluency. Krashen (1993) goes so far as to claim that students "can acquire language on their own" provided they receive adequate exposure to comprehensible language and that acquisition takes place in a relaxed, stress-free atmosphere. EL would seem to easily satisfy both these conditions, as it involves exposure

to large amounts of relatively easy material, at home, with little or no follow-up work or testing. Krashen further maintains that the unconscious process of language acquisition, such as occurs when reading or listening for pleasure, is more successful and longer lasting than "conscious" learning.

Extensive Listening Defined

Waring, one of the earliest proponents of extensive listening, has proposed that an extensive listening program would, at a minimum, involve listening to (or being involved in) massive amounts of text; the use of listening texts which learners are able to comprehend reasonably smoothly; high levels of comprehension; the absence of pre-set questions or tasks; listening at or below one's level of "comfortable fluent listening ability".

If we wish to more explicitly describe the characteristics of an EL program, the extensive reading program characteristics presented by Day and Bamford, (1998) are a convenient starting point. An extensive listening program could be described as one in which:

- Listening occurs primarily, but not exclusively, outside of the classroom., and, may be done when and where the student chooses.
- Learners are exposed to as much aural/visual foreign language input as they feel they can successfully manage.
- Both the level and content of the listening input are determined individually by the learners, who are free to stop using material which they feel is unsuitable.
- Listening materials from various genre are available to encourage listening for different purposes and in different ways.
- Materials should be well within a student's level of aural comprehension; the easier the better. Students should ideally be able to comprehend 70%+ of what they hear.
- The purposes of listening are determined by the nature of the material and the interests of the learner, and related to enjoyment, information gathering and general understanding .
- There are no exercises explicitly based on the listening to be completed. .
- Listening outside class should ideally be done individually, silently, and at the student's own pace.
- Teachers orient participants to the goals of the program, explain the methodology, and guide them in getting the most out of the program.

While there are few hard and fast 'requirements' for engaging in EL, it is unlikely to be appropriate for students in the beginning stages of language study. At a minimum, students would need to have reached both a threshold level of lexico- grammatical knowledge, and be able to comprehend basic speech to begin. Further research needs to be undertaken in this area in order to more clearly determine where this threshold lies, and how we might enable learners to attain it. Additionally, learners will need to receive a thorough orientation to the EL program, so that they are clear on what EL is, what they are to do, and why they are engaging in EL. Teachers can lead learners in extensive listening practice by helping them establish a system of goal-setting, planning, conducting self-study, and reflection and self-evaluation. (Benson & Voller, 1997).

Preparing Students for EL

Cutting (2002) refers to the role of the instructor in EL as being primarily "supportive", and proposes that instructors enable their students to begin listening independently by encouraging the following approach: self-analysis, in which "learners think about their needs, problems, and preferred learning styles"; goal-setting; in which learners "link their needs and problems with their learning objectives"; planning, including making a "study plan considering factors as materials, learning strategies, study time available, proficiency level, and learning style."; and reflection on, and self-evaluation of, the learning. This sort of preparation could be carried out during classes as part of an intensive listening exercise.

Once a program is underway, finding adequate time, energy and sufficient amounts of material at the 'right' level become important considerations. It is the initial stages some students may find EL too difficult or time consuming, and become tempted to give up. While it is entirely appropriate in EL that students select their own material and pace their own listening, they should not be given the choice of opting out. Learners will need to be constantly encouraged, as fatigue and frustration are bound to occur, and at points finding suitable material will become difficult. At the same time as the learner`s listening ability develops, however, he or she will gain motivation and be able to access to a broader selection of more interesting and challenging material.

It is also important for learners to consider early on the differences in intensive and extensive listening. Beginners will likely tend to feel more comfortable and confident using

prescribed materials and engaging in tasks characteristic of intensive listening, because it is both more familiar to them and more easily managed in terms of quantity and content. Learners may in the initial stages may need help as well in simply understanding that a "style" is comprised of various strategies we rely on consistently, yet more or less unconsciously. Students may not understand what strategies are, much less why they should be learned, how they can be used, when and where they are most effectively employed, and how to evaluate their usefulness. Even intermediate level language learners are frequently unclear about the range of strategies available, fail to consistently identify viable strategies, employ ineffective or inappropriate strategies, fail to consistently employ strategies identified as viable, fail to consciously employ strategies, and often depend instead on repeated exposure to the material or translation for comprehension. For these reasons, raising learners` awareness of effective listening strategies is a good starting point in introducing learners to EL, as their use can help learners understand more of the language input which they will encounter.

The first component should include activities that prepare learners for what they will hear. Initially, students need to make conscious any knowledge they have relevant to the content, background, setting, participants and goals or purposes of the text they will hear, and the vocabulary likely to be used in that setting or situation. Next, a purpose for listening must be established: what information is required, and in how much detail. Finally, ways in which the task might be approached can be presented and weighed before listening begins.

Pre-listening activities help students make decisions about what to listen for and where to focus their attention while listening, while encouraging them to bring existing cultural, linguistic and personal knowledge to bear on the task. The following checklist illustrates some of the strategies that might be presented in the pre-listening component.

1) Identify your Purpose
2) Use Visual or Environmental Clues
3) Predict words and phrases you are likely to hear
4) Focus on Key Vocabulary
5) Think of a Synonym (or antonym)

6) Use the Vocabulary / Rehearse

7) Personalize the Information

8) Think Ahead

9) Relate the situation to your own experience

10) Use Your Imagination

During the listening activity itself, students should be encouraged to monitor their level of comprehension and make decisions about appropriate strategy use. Students need to consistently monitor their level of comprehension and to match the input they receive with the predictions they made in the pre-listening activities. This is a very complex task, made all the more difficult because teacher intervention in virtually impossible at this stage. Thus, consistent and systematic training in the use of strategies appropriate to particular tasks and extensive pre-listening activities need to be incorporated into any program of listening instruction. Explicating and rehearsing these skills before students begin listening may be advisable; on the other hand, demonstrating afterwards that students could have understood more by having employed the strategies may have more impact, and convince more students to make use of them.

1) Re-confirm your purpose

2) Ask yourself questions

3) Think ahead Use grammar as a guide

4) Listen for collocations

5) Identify signalling phrases and discourse markers

6) Listen for stress/intonation/pitch

7) Substitute similar sounding words

8) Backfill from what you have understood

9) Shadow

10) Confirm and clarify your understanding

Post-listening activities provide an opportunity for learners to evaluate their level of comprehension, compare and discuss strategies and reflect on alternative approaches to the task. Pair, small group or class discussions (in the students' first language where necessary) are the simplest way to encourage this. More important than getting the

"right answer" is how the answer was obtained, as this knowledge can become part of the students' skills repertoire and applied to successive tasks and in other contexts. The connection between pre-listening and post-listening also needs to be made explicit, so that learners can develop the ability to better prepare for and predict what they will encounter by broadening the range of strategies they employ. Performance checklists can provide a good starting point for discussions. Such approaches encourage students to reflect on the steps taken (or not taken) at various points in the listening activity by themselves and their peers, and enable them to see which strategies they (and others) employ most frequently, and which they tend to neglect. Discussing their approach with classmates whose approaches to listening differ should help students adjust their strategies and broaden their skills repertoire. In the process of doing so, and applying what they've learned from their peers, learners should gain access to more language, making content more comprehensible. Some post-listening strategies learners should employ include:

1) Confirm your predictions
2) Paraphrase or summarize
3) Assess Your Success
4) Note Down what you Remember
5) Listen while reading
6) Confirm and Clarify Your Understanding
7) Evaluate the Success of Your Strategies
8) Evaluate Your Level of comprehension

In adopting a cyclical approach to listening based on pre-listening, on-task listening and post-listening activities, each of which in turn incorporate appropriate, viable complementary strategies, we are encouraging students to listen to confirm expectations, as well as to comprehend. Such an approach engages the student in the tasks more deeply, as they have posited something and are listening to confirm predictions, not simply to glean information. Listening should be presented to learners, particularly beginners, as a cyclical rather than as a linear process, as students all too often tend to view it in the latter terms. Interpreted improperly, "Could you play the tape again?" might seem to indicate a linear approach; if we present the tape as a loop, it may in fact encourage learners to take a different view of the process of listening. It is facility with the process, not simply

the final product, which indicates the development of viable skills that will enable comprehension in other settings and situations. An emphasis on listening comprehension which incorporates awareness-raising at the metacognitive level with the application and consistent evaluation of listening strategies at the cognitive level will help learners more successfully capitalize on the language input they receive and, theoretically, lead them to achieve greater success in other areas of language learning.

The tasks used to guide students though these steps should encourage learners to focus on the listening process, not simply the outcome; focus on how "the answer" was found, rather than on just finding the answer itself; allow a variety of means of achieving the same end; and, draw on learners' experience outside the classroom. Important considerations in the choice of the tasks we use to acquaint learners with strategies include whether the cognitive skills demanded are suited to the task and students' level of ability, the extent to which they are in harmony with what we know of language comprehension and "real-world" approaches to listening, the extent to which they are in synch with what we know of "real-world" approaches to listening and whether these tasks encourage the conscious use of schematic, contextual and systemic knowledge in decoding, analyzing, and comprehending speech.

Learners then need to carefully consider the type of listening that they want to focus on. While some learners focus on areas in which they wish to improve, such as understanding native-speed connected speech, others may work on understanding lyrics simply because it is enjoyable. Being given a choice in selecting topics, genres and materials has been shown to increase student involvement and motivation. Examples of listening resources that can be employed in EL include audiobooks, storytelling websites, spoken word and news websites, interviews, videotapes, TV, Youtube.com, movies and dramas, academic lectures, speeches, and virtually any type of music that has comprehensible lyrics. At the same time, it is important for learners to select materials that they can later use to gauge the efficacy of the strategies they employ. Materials with accompanying scripts, keys or texts are all quite useful in this regard.

More advanced learners, on the other hand, commonly demonstrate more interest in extensive listening practice which involves using a wider variety of authentic materials.

Since they are ready to engage in various types of real-life listening, this, rather than scripted material, is likely to be more useful in developing their listening abilities. Intermediate learners report liking to work on both types of listening. Regardless of the level, however, striking a balance between both types of practice is important, with beginners focusing on more structured or scripted materials and intermediate and advanced learners graduating to increasingly authentic listening material. Lowes and Target (1998) emphasize that "no one kind of listening is better than another and students need to be able to do both and to choose the right kind of listening skill for the circumstances" (p.50).

Benefits of Extensive Listening

Wenden (2002) states that "the notion of learner-centred instruction in foreign and second languages grew out of the recognition that language learners are diverse, in their reasons for learning another language, their approach to learning, and their abilities" (p.32). In learner-centered learning, there are no particular restraints on the time or place learning may take place. Learners may choose any material they find suitable and interesting, so long as it is in English and easy enough for them to comprehend. Because students select their own listening material, they are more involved and more highly motivated. This alone has an enormous potential to expand students' listening skills outside the classroom, and to encourage them to take a more active and conscious role in decisions regarding their own educations.

EL has the potential to benefit learners in many ways. They may, for example, pursue listening practice without externally imposed time constraints. Moreover, individual learners decide their own goals, choose their own materials, evaluate the efficacy of their own learning strategies, and broaden and refine their repertoire of listening skills. They are then in a better position to initiate learning based on personal needs, priorities and preferences. Furthermore, engaging in EL shows promise for developing learners' metacognitive skills for language learning. Thus, EL should not only foster the development of learners' listening skills, but also their ability to more consciously guide themselves in independently learning a second language. (Cutting, 2004)

Extensive listening has an important role in the development of learners` aural

comprehension ability, particularly in situations where students need exposure to large amounts of comprehensible input. For most learners, especially those EFL settings, this type of input is most readily available through extended listening. Since learners all have different learning styles, providing opportunities to engage in EL should benefit a wider range of learners than in the case of intensive or classroom listening. With access to the internet now nearly universal in many areas, opportunities to find appropriate listening texts of a suitable level of difficulty and interest should become increasingly easy.

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