

A Movie A Day Keeps the Listening Problems Away

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Abstract:

As a ‘Cinderella skill’, listening is probably the least popular course to teach and the most difficult skill to acquire. There is very limited amount of research on extensive listening despite the emergent need of having aural English exposure to EFL learners. The best way to learn listening is through listening, so the role of extensive listening (EL) is crucial to improve listening fluency. However, due to the less accessible listening process, learners are often unable to recognize the words. In light of this, Reading-While-Listening (RWL) can serve as a bridging activity leading to listening fluency. It provides both aural and visual input to help learners keep the listening problems away. This presentation discusses the benefits of RWL and ideas for RWL materials to develop learners’ listening skills in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Reading-While-Listening (RWL), listening fluency

Introduction

Listening is arguably the most difficult skill to acquire. Despite learning English for years, many EFL learners are still struggling especially when they have to deal with authentic listening materials. Unfortunately, listening has probably received the least attention in EFL classrooms. Most teachers do not find this job prestigious and many students do not like the listening sessions as well. There is only a very limited amount of research conducted to find out why and how to overcome this problem either. For the reasons above, listening has become “Cinderella skill” in many language teaching especially when compared to its elder sister: speaking (Nunan, 1997).

The fact that listening process is not accessible to inspection as that of other skills also corroborate the idea that listening cannot be “taught”. Most of the time, teachers only ‘test’ listening, and not teach how to listen (Field, 2003). Learners only listen to a tape and answer the given questions. However, there are some anecdotal evidence that indicate that some learners indeed acquire listening skills via more interesting ways, e.g. films, songs, etc. Based on this situation, I would share about typical listening problems and the benefits of Reading-While-Listening (RWL) to help EFL learners, especially the lower level ones, to develop their listening fluency. I would also talk about some ideas to make listening materials more interesting.

EFL Listening Problems

There are many reasons why L2 listeners, especially lower proficiency learners, find it difficult when they deal with authentic source of listening (e.g. conversation, speech, films). Interestingly, they may know the meaning of the words when they see them in print but fail to do so in speech. In other words, they have not acquired the automaticity to listen with ease the aural input delivered at a normal speech. Although both reading and listening are considered to

be receptive skills, there are several distinctive features which make listening more challenging especially for lower proficiency learners. The following are some of the common problems:

- **Word recognition**

Although it seems to be a low-level processing issue, word recognition is a serious problem for L2 listeners. A word like ‘burst’, for instance, might be heard as ‘birth’ (Field, 2009, cited in Renandya). In addition, words in spoken texts often go through some changes especially when they blend with surrounding words. They may even sound a bit or completely different from their original forms in isolation. These may occur because of assimilation, contractions, or reduced forms. In assimilation, for instance, /n/ will become [m] before [p, b, m]; thus ‘ten people’ will be heard as ‘tem people’ (Field, 2003). In addition, since pauses normally occur after twelve syllables or so, L2 listeners will have less time to think about where words begin or end. This inability to process the spoken words will eventually lead to comprehension breakdown.

- **Real-time process**

When it comes to listening, several communication processes take place at the same time, placing a far greater load on memory (Eastman, 1991; Ridgway, 2000). For example, they need to “decode” or identify words, put them in the right context to understand the intended message while anticipating more messages to come. Consequently, struggling learners will experience cognitive overload. They may lose the whole message while struggling to decode the . In reading, learners can re-read the text to guess the meaning from the contexts; unfortunately, they cannot do it in listening as they have little control over what the speaker says (Renandya Farrell, 2011).

- **Fast speed**

A normal speech rate in English is estimated to be approximately 150-180 words per minute (Allison, 1990, cited in Chang, 2009). Within few seconds, an incredible amount of information needs to be processed, leaving a very little room for learners to rethink what they have heard. In other words, to understand speech produced in a natural context, the listening process should be automatic. For weak L2 listeners, listening tapes (with much slower speed) are already fast, let alone spoken texts at normal speed. This will pose a serious threat as they barely catch the words so it is nearly impossible to employ listening strategies and comprehension problem take place.

As an effective way to learn listening is through listening; extensive listening plays a very important role in L2 listening development. Looking at the complexities of listening process, teachers can do something to help them become avid listeners. This ‘help’ can come in various forms, one of which is through a combination of visual and aural input (reading and listening). As text is something learners can get a grip on, it might come in handy. This listening-and-reading practice is called Reading-While-Listening (RWL).

The Benefits of Reading-While-Listening (RWL)

As the name speaks for itself, Reading-While-Listening (RWL) is a practice to develop fluency in listening by involving reading (McMahon, 1983, cited in Askildson, 2011). This is usually conducted using prerecorded audio books played in conjunction with silent reading of the written text to assist listening comprehension by giving L2 listeners more access to understanding letter-sound relationship. They can do this while they are adjusting to the spoken rate, rhythm, and the natural flow of the language (Chang, 2009). There are also many benefits L2 listeners can get from RWL.

First, it will have direct influence toward listening fluency. A study by Chang (2009, cited in Chang, 2009) reported that Taiwanese college students with Reading-While-Listening (RWL) outperformed those who did Listening Only (LO) in listening comprehension and gap-filling test. Vandergrift (2004). A study conducted by Markham, Peter, and McCarthy (2001,

cited in Vandergrift, 2004) tried to compare the effects of different captions on the listening performance of intermediate-level students of Spanish. The study revealed that the English captions group outperformed the Spanish captions group who, in turn, outperformed the no-captions group. They argue the students would benefit from a cycle of repeated viewing, progressing from L1 to L2 captions and finally to no captions, particularly when using challenging video material.

Another thing is since learning cannot begin without understanding input (at the right level), listening is fundamental to speaking (Nunan, 1997). In RWL, L2 listeners are exposed to the use of words in context, correct pronunciation, rhythm, and other spoken text elements, so they have a role model in speaking which in time will help them develop their speaking ability.

As L2 listeners in RWL are also exposed to the written text, it helps them to develop their reading fluency. Reid (1971, cited in Askildson, 2011) found that students trained with an RWL treatment performed significantly better in terms of comprehension and reading rate. The finding of a study by Blum, Koskinen, Tennant, Parker, Straub, and Curry (1995, cited in Chang, 2009) also showed how learners made improvement in their reading fluency after learning through RWL (or called simultaneous reading and listening to audiotaped books). In another study of RWL in an L2 context, Amer (1997, cited in Askildson, 2011) found that EFL students who were given RWL treatments significantly outperformed those given only silent reading treatments in series of classroom treatments.

In relation to affective factors, RWL has also made listening tasks more enjoyable for L2 listeners. A research of learning vocabulary through three modes: Reading, Reading-While-Listening (RWL), and Listening Only (LO) among 35 Japanese learners by Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua (2008, cited in Chang, 2009) indicated that learners found the story presented in RWL mode the most comfortable one. Another small scale study conducted by Brown (2007, cited in Chang) also revealed the same preference.

The key point here is there are many benefits of RWL so it will be worth trying it out in classrooms. I will come up with some suggestions as how this can be put into practice

Films for RWL

The Reading-While-Listening (RWL) material I use is English films with English subtitles. Aside from being interesting, there are many advantages of using films. First of all, they can reflect the way a language is used in real life. Another important factor is they are rich sources of topics, starting from actions to non-fictions. As there are more and more films available in stores or websites, L2 listeners can have more freedom to choose their favorite films. From technical point of view, learners can work at their own pace since they can pause, rewind and fast forward the films, giving them more time to understand and enjoy the story, and at the same time, get exposed to the vocabulary, phrases, and idioms. Some L2 listeners can also take notes of the new vocabulary and review them when they have free time. This activity can be done as a part of independent learning or a part of classroom activities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed listening problems and how Reading-While-Listening (RWL) can help L2 listeners acquire listening fluency. I have also explained how films can become resourceful as RWL materials. More and further research have to be taken to ensure the varieties of teaching activities using RWL.

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