

Reading-While-Listening (RWL): Killing Two Birds with One Stone

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Although listening is probably the most difficult skill to acquire in EFL contexts, it receives less attention in classrooms, especially if it is compared to speaking (Nunan, 1997; Renandya & Farrell, 2010). In addition, it seems that a lot of listening practice only focuses on testing listening. Due to the complexity of listening process, listening fluency is a challenge, especially for low-level learners. Aside from the speech rate, the inability to recognize English words has posed as a big problem, leaving the learners helpless. In light of this, Reading-While-Listening (RWL) can play an important role as a bridge to listening fluency. This technique provides both aural and visual input to help EFL learners as they are on their way to acquire English. This method can kill two birds (i.e. improving reading and listening fluency) with one stone. This presentation will discuss why learners may find listening difficult, explain how RWL can help them to achieve listening fluency and provide examples of RWL-based activities and materials in EFL contexts. It is expected that this presentation can make teaching and learning listening more enjoyable and thus, more effective.

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

Listening and its Challenges

Listening is the first language skill people have since they were born. It is also the most common communicative activity in daily life, as mentioned by Morley (1991, p. 82): "we can expect to listen twice as much as we speak, four times more than we read, and five times more than we write."

In EFL learning, listening and reading are important as the source of comprehensible input which is necessary for language development. However, too often people take listening for granted. As a language teacher and member of teachers' community, I notice that only few language teachers are interested in teaching listening and not much effort has been put into developing listening methods and materials. It is also common for ELT practitioners to "test" instead of developing students' listening skills. These have confirmed what Nunan (1997) said, that listening is the "Cinderella skill" -- it does not receive a lot of attention as that of its sister, speaking. This way, it is possible that many students do not really enjoy learning listening and even find them difficult and boring. In addition, the implicit nature of listening and its comprehension process (it is not accessible to inspection as that of other skills) has made it even more difficult to teach and develop listening skills.

Although both reading and listening are considered to be receptive skills, there are some major differences. In reading, readers can read at their own pace, skip some words, even reread the text if necessary. However, these privileges are not available to listeners (apart from asking for repetition/clarification, which is a bit difficult in some cases, e.g. attending seminars). Thus, there is a noticeable difference between the reading and listening abilities of EFL learners, particularly in Asia (Rost, 2014, cited in Siegel, 2016).

Purdy (1997, cited in Banat, 2015) defined listening as "the active and dynamic process of attending, perceiving, interpreting, remembering, and responding to the expressed (verbal and nonverbal), needs, concerns, and information offered by other human beings." It

is indeed not a passive process. It involves both bottom-up and top-down processes and requires the use of non-linguistic as well as linguistic knowledge. While top-down processes are important, weak EFL learners are still struggling with basic listening skills. Listening requires EFL learners to overcome at least the following listening challenges:

- **Word recognition**

Word recognition, which includes, among others, perception of individual phonemes and sound combinations, is a part of bottom-up process. It turns out that word recognition, although look very simple, has posed as a serious problem for EFL listeners. For example, the word ‘buried, might be heard as ‘married and this can create a problem as it may lead to misunderstanding (Field, 2009, cited in Renandya, 2010). To make it worse, in spoken texts, some words often go through changes (e.g. assimilation, contractions) especially when they blend with other words, making them sound a bit or completely different from their original forms in isolation. For instance, /n/ will become [m] before [p, b, m]; thus “ten people’ ill be heard as “tem people” (Field, 2003). Developing these word recognition skills could help learners become more familiar with the spoken text, i.e. identifying the aural form of words, especially distinction among similar-sounding words. In addition, in what considered “a normal speech”, most pauses occur after twelve syllables or so, which make EFL learners face another problem, speech rate, which will be discussed in the next point.

- **Fast speech rate**

In general, what considered to be a normal speech rate in English is around 150-180 words per minute which means automatization of word recognition skills is crucial (Allison, 1990, cited in Chang, 2009). An incredible amount of information needs to be processed in few seconds, leaving a very little room for EFL learners to rethink what they have just heard. The word recognition problem, combined with fast speech rate, will create an immense amount of pressure. For struggling EFL listeners, listening tapes designed for language learning (with probably much slower speed) are already fast, so a normal speed will make them frustrated as they barely catch the words.

- **Real-time process**

In listening, listeners have to parse speech sounds into words quickly so they can retrieve the meanings of the words before constructing the meaning of sentences. For weak EFL listeners, this means that they will have less time to think about where words begin or end. It is enough to say that several communication processes take place at the same time and place a far greater load on memory (Eastman, 1991; Ridgway, 2000). Consequently, struggling learners will experience cognitive overload and comprehension breakdown. 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).

Looking at these problems, it is important to address these issues. Teachers can provide “extra help” as learners are on their way to acquire listening fluency. A combination of visual and aural input (in other words, reading and listening), will boost their confidence as they feel like getting a grip on. This combination of listening and reading is called Reading-While-Listening (RWL).

The Benefits of Reading-While-Listening (RWL)

Reading-While-Listening (RWL) is a practice to develop fluency in listening by involving reading (McMahon, 1983, cited in Askildson, 2011). Usually teachers use recorded audio books played along with silent reading of the written text to assist listening comprehension, hoping to give ELF listeners more access to understanding letter-sound relationship. RWL benefit learners by giving them more time as they adjust to the spoken rate, rhythm, and the natural flow of the language in meaningful context, instead of simply word-for-word context (Chang, 2009).

Implementing RWL is like “killing two birds with one stone” as it can improve both listening and reading fluency, at the same time. 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. In addition, another 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.

In terms of improving 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 indicated how learners improved their reading fluency after learning through RWL (or called simultaneous reading and listening to audiotaped books). The finding of Amer’s study in L2 context (1997, cited in Askildson, 2011) also supported the idea that EFL students who were given RWL treatments significantly outperformed those given only silent reading treatments in series of classroom treatments.

The last reason why RWL is proved to be effective is it helps learners’ affective factors. RWL is known to make listening tasks more enjoyable for EFL learners. 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. This way, if learners enjoy doing extensive listening, they will learn listening more often, meaning that over time, they will have deeper level of language comprehension and enhance their word recognition skills, which will lead them to improved listening fluency

To sum up, the benefits of RWL are so obvious that I will propose some RWL-based activities that might be implemented.

RWL-based activities and materials in EFL contexts.

RWL is versatile as you can use audio books or if you want to give authentic language, you can choose to work with films, and videos with English subtitles. These can reflect the way a language is used in real life and are rich sources of topics, starting from actions to non-fictions. Having a wide variety of topics means that the learners will have more options and some can be from their favorite topics. Once they see that the learning materials are relevant and interesting, they will be more motivated and thus, extensive listening/viewing can take place much faster. 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 along the way, get exposed to the vocabulary, phrases, and idioms.

The following points are some outlines of RWL-based activities:

Pre-listening activities

- Ask them about their favorite movies, actors, and actresses.
- Ask the learners to choose an English movie/video (can be in groups/pairs)
- Ask the students to watch it with English subtitles (can be assigned as homework)

The output-based activities could be done in many various ways, among others:

- Vocabulary: ask them to 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.
- Dictation/Teacher Read-alouds (could be useful for pronunciation classes)
- Speaking: Role-play (e.g. Ask them to do role play on some scenes of the movie to give them a speaking practice)
- Writing skills: ask them to rewrite some dialogues with different responses/plots/endings.

After a couple of times doing RWL, most students will unconsciously improve their listening fluency. It will make the listening process effortless and spontaneous. This repeated RWL on a particular movie is also related to narrow listening, which leads to a higher degree of comprehension (Krashen, 1996). For example, the national debate champions in China watched some movies over and over again until they got it all right (Yanren, 2007) and also by a group of French lower proficiency learners (Dupuy, 1999)

The following links are, among others, sources of videos with English subtitles:

<http://storynory.com/2010/06/13/theprincess-who-had-a-heart/>

<https://www.ted.com/talks>

<http://www.bookbox.com/>

<http://learningenglish.voanews.com/>

Conclusion

Overall, listening challenges, how and why Reading-While-Listening (RWL) can help L2 listeners acquire listening fluency have been explained. Due to different teaching-learning context, teachers will be the best judge to adopt and adapt this course plan. More and further research on developing RWL needs to be taken to ensure the quality of learning, considering various factors affecting learning.

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