



# Listening in the Language Classroom: The Case for Extensive Listening

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# Listening in the Language Classroom: The Case for Extensive Listening

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## Abstract

This paper considers Extensive Listening (EL) as an approach not just for discretely improving listening skills, but to improve overall language ability. Extensive listening is the provision to learners of abundant aural texts. EL is currently under-used and under-researched, and there is a relative paucity of materials available to be used. Within this paper, the nature listening itself is considered, and the current prevalent approaches to listening noted. Extensive Listening is then introduced and explained, firstly in comparison with Extensive Reading (ER). Reasons are posited for using EL, and three methods for doing so are introduced. The author concludes noting that this is a research area that is likely to see considerably increased interest in the coming years.

この論文は、多聴 (Extensive Listening) をリスニング力を向上させるだけでなく、言語学習の全体的な向上のためのアプローチとすることを考察したものである。多聴は、聞き取りのための豊富な学習材料を学習者に提供するものである。多聴は、現状では、使用も研究も十分になされておらず、学習教材も十分に提供されていない。この論文では、リスニングそれ自体も考察し、また関係するリスニングアプローチにも言及する。そして多聴を取り上げ、説明する。最初に多読と比較し、多聴を使うことの利点を挙げ、三つの多聴の学習法を説明する。最後に、多聴が将来的に関心が高まる調査分野であることを述べる。

**Keywords:** Extensive Listening, Listening skills

Following the growth of Extensive Reading (ER), there has been increasing recent practical and theoretical interest in Extensive Listening (EL), not just to improve discrete listening skills, but as a suggested method for aiding overall language improvement. This paper offers an overview of the relevant literature on listening, and on extensive listening, and considers how extensive listening may be introduced into a language program.

## 1. What is ‘listening’?

In discussing approaches to listening for language learners, it is initially helpful to consider the nature of listening itself. Most obviously and immediately, listening requires the assigning of meaning to sounds. Further to this, and differing to reading, is the need to recognise multiple suprasegmental elements such as rhythm, stress and intonation, all supported by an interconnecting and mutually supporting background knowledge of language, situations (where learners may have ‘scripts’ in their minds) and of people (Buck, 1995, 2001; Rost, 1990; Widowson, 1983).

As with the parallel but differing skill of reading, listening has often been described in top-down and bottom-up terms (e.g. Nunan, 2002). In the former case, the listener attempts a holistic understanding, informed by pre-existing world knowledge whereas in the latter case, the learner builds using the various blocks available to him/her, attempting to piece meaning together - from sounds to words, and words to sentences, upwards in length and thus complexity (Richards, 2005).

## 2. L2 listening—a difficult skill

Listening is however not a skill nor a means of language acquisition that can be acquired and improved with undue ease (e.g. Chang & Millett, 2013). Listening has regularly been argued as being the most challenging of the four skills for learners, and the most difficult to improve (Bacon, 1989; Hasan, 2000; Renandya & Farrell, 2010). The difficulties faced in L2 listening include speech speed, variability (of dialect, volume, pitch etc), unclear word boundaries, colloquial language, and a necessity to process in real time all as discussed in Buck (1995), Buck (2001), Field (2002), and Renandya and Farrell (2011). Zeng (2007), cited in Renandya and Farrell (2011), found that for EFL students in China, the biggest challenge posed was that of speech speed. Furthermore, there can be the added affective challenge, where the L2 listener may be additionally apprehensive of the challenge due to the inability to ‘hold’ the incoming language, in the way a printed text can be held, managed and thus accessed repeatedly (Bacon, 1989).

While L1 language learners have an abundance of aural language input (notably present considerably before production, as growing, developing infants), L2 learners can often be restricted to a paucity of aural input (Rost 1994, 2006). Obviously enough, this is particularly an issue for learners in the EFL setting compared with the ESL setting, as the language learner leaves the classroom and is surrounded by his/her own L1. Further to the lack of aural familiarity as an infant, while L1 learners’ oracy is present before introducing literacy, for L2 learners, oral and literacy skills are generally introduced at the same time (Stephens, 2010) which can be seen as problematic from affective and cognitive perspectives (Chang and Millett, 2013).

Interestingly, despite these multifarious noted challenges of L2 listening, compared with the other language skill areas, listening still appears to be relatively under-researched (Vandergrift, 2007).

## 3. Typical and traditional approaches to teaching listening

### **Intensive listening**

Commonly and traditionally, and readers here may be able to readily associate from their own language learning days at school, L2 listening training has been provided via disembodied extracts, wherein the listener-as-student is required to isolate certain answers to set questions (Rost, 2002). Chang (2016), in an overview of the listening literature, argues that there is little

to support this as an effective approach (p.29), particularly in isolation.

### **Dictation**

Further to intensive listening, another common approach to the teaching of L2 listening is dictation (Field, 2008). While Chang (2016) notes that this is commonly used in specific instances - addressing particular bottom-up aspects of listening that regularly challenges students, such as contractions or linking, my own experience over several years teaching high school students in Japan was that I was asked to do this as a regularised approach - as a human tape recorder, but perhaps one that could amend speed and other prosodic elements based on my own observation of levels of student comprehension.

### **Strategies**

Likely deriving from the dualistic bottom-up and top-down psycholinguistic processing view of listening comes the 'strategies approach', whereby learners are encouraged to adopt a range of metacognitive strategies to aid their listening (e.g. Littlejohn, 2008). Renandya and Farrell (2010) strongly argue against this approach, asserting that there is insufficient evidence to support such a strategies approach. The authors argue that particularly problematic is viewing the strategies approach in opportunity cost terms - excessive time ill-spent in language programs that would be better spent in alternative and likely more effective approaches.

## **4. Changing attitudes to teaching listening: listening for overall language improvement**

There is increasing interest evident in the literature in moving from viewing listening as a simple 'skill', to be considered and developed in isolation, but a means in itself to acquire and improve linguistic knowledge (Chang, 2016; Dunkel, 1991; Renandya & Farrell, 2010; Richards, 2005; Rost, 2002; Vandergrift, 2007). Using listening as a tool for improvement rather than viewing merely as a discrete skill to improve is a key underpinning of the use of extensive listening to improve target language ability, as with extensive reading. Consideration of extensive listening—massed listening provision to improve language ability—in this regard now follows.

## **5. Extensive listening—what is it?**

Stemming at least in part from the burgeoning Extensive Reading literature, Extensive Listening has increasingly been promulgated as a means to provide students with the necessary aural input. The L2 literature remains relatively scarce, particularly when one compares with that of Extensive Reading, but scholars in the last decade or so have been promoting and researching EL (e.g. Brown, 2007; Chang, 2009, 2011, 2016; Chang and Millett, 2013; Ducker & Saunders, 2014; Renandya and Farrell, 2010).

While there appears to be no widely agreed definition of quite what EL 'is', an overarching agreement of sorts can be noted in the growing literature. EL is: the provision of a large volume of aural input, which should be at an accessible level; readers should enjoy the listening; EL is targeted at improving listening fluency (Waring, 2008). General use of the term fluency in language study can be understood in terms of accuracy, speed and fluidity of understanding (Segalowitz, 2003). Waring (2008) suggests that in specific reference to listening, we can also understand in relation to Schmidt's psychological construct - the speed and ease of processing. Chang and Millett (2013) offer this brief characterisation of the 'what' aspect: "...refers to learners doing a lot of easy, comprehensible and enjoyable listening practice..." (p.213). They

continue to suggest means of doing so, but this would appear unduly limiting and we can choose to stay only with this characterisation, for present purposes.

Regarding the purpose, that of improving listening fluency, Segalowicz (2003) characterises fluency as accuracy, speed and fluidity. Waring (2008) carefully considers the nature of listening ‘fluency’ and notes that this the varying speed of automaticity of aural language processing, following Schmidt’s (1992) construct. Thus, to improve the automaticity of the processing of the heard target language is what we mean by increasing listening fluency. Interestingly, Waring continues to suggest that the difficulty of a text is not entirely intrinsic within a text, but is dependent on the prospective listener. While this may be the case, and that listeners are indeed all unique specimens in a sense, this is not particularly helpful, and some generalisations are required for determining text types and levels.

## **6. Comparing Extensive Listening and Extensive Reading**

There are similarities to be seen in the literature, and it can be seen that a proportion of the EL literature is derived at least in part from that of ER, which is considerably more developed. That said, there are differences, and these are highlighted by Chafe (1985), Chang (2012) and Waring (2008). The differences can mainly be seen in the differences between the skills of spoken language and written language, and are due to the differing manner in which these are engaged with. They offer differing challenges. The list has been amended and tabulated in Table 1 on page 5 for easy reference, expanding on Chang (2012, pp. 28-29).

## **7. Reasons to use Extensive Listening**

Within the L2 literature one finds a number of suggested reasons for favouring extensive listening for second language learners (Brown, Waring & Donkaewbua, 2008; Elley, 1989; Gary, 1975). From the earlier literature, four reasons are from Gary (1975) - cognitive, efficiency, utility and affective. The fifth of the reasons below derives from more recent theoretical discussions.

### **1. Cognitive argument for massed early exposure- an argument from L1 learning**

In the first regard, the cognitive argument is whereby L2 learning is positioned in relation to the acquisition of one’s first language. Infants have massed exposure from the environment before initial effective production, and the parallel is drawn here that learners’ short term memory can be better employed in focusing on derivation of intended meaning of the language to which they are exposed. Thus, such early provision of a volume of levelled target language would follow the ‘natural’ L1 process. That said, it remains a significant open question within the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA) regarding the similarity, if any, between childhood acquisition of L1 and any later acquisition of other languages.

### **2. Efficiency—more ‘bang for buck’**

Secondly, there is the efficiency argument, that the listening materials provided via EL are levelled and varied in genre, thus more effective and realistic than that provided only by teacher talk, and of any limited and limiting peer interaction. The materials provide better ‘bang for the buck’ in terms of class time provision (from the teaching perspective) and personal learner time investment and energy (from the student perspective).

Table 1: Differences between Listening and Reading for language learners

| Differences                                 | Speaking (Listening)  | Written (reading)   |
|---|---|---|
| Complexity / Simplicity                     | Chunked shorter; units connected predominantly with so, and, but  | Lengthier, more clauses   |
| Completeness                                | Often incomplete, short (sub-7 word) idea units   | Sentences are generally presented as complete units   |
| Continuity                                  | False starts, fillers, hesitations self-corrections, repetitions  | Sentences and paragraphs are more coherent and cohesive   |
| Correctness, Formality, Register            | More colloquial expressions, slang expressions  | Written language, particularly that aimed at language learners tends to be more formal - more 'correct' |
| Grammar                                     | Often non-standard grammar  | Written language, particularly in textbooks, will be standard grammar                                   |
| Distance and immediacy                      | Speaking is generally face-to-face and thus inevitably more targeted and personal - directed at an individual (or a group of individuals) | Distanced, thus less targeted and more isolated from the reader   |
| Prosodic differences                        | Different meaning may be determined by differences in the various prosodic elements' stress, volume, intonation                           | None can be isolated NB unless written in dialect*  |
| Consulting a reference to aid understanding | If listeners cannot identify the utterance, there is no possible recourse to a dictionary   | Written texts can be supported by dictionaries (and now by online translation softwares)                |
| Time constraint - immediacy                 | In real-life listening, it is one-time only   | When reading texts, the reader can go back any number of times to re-read                               |
| Speed control of recipient                  | No speed control (though softwares now sometimes offer variable playback speed)   | Reader can operate at own speed   |
| Changing of speaker                         | Listeners may be confused and distracted by speaker change - due to e.g. accent, speed  | No changes - written (read) form remains same   |

### 3. Utility—listening is the primary real-life skill set

Thirdly is utility, and Holden (n.d.) cites the work of Gilman and Moody (1984), who indicate that of the respective language skills, that of listening is dominant - adults spend around 40-50% of their time listening (compared with 20-30% listening, 10-15% reading, and less than 10% writing). The argument is thus that curriculum designers would be better representing this weighting in the relative skills provision - considerably increasing the provision of listening.

Of all the four arguments, that of utility does appear persuasive for those of us designing language curricula - the neglected Cinderella sister of listening should attend the ball.

#### **4. Affective considerations—control and motivation**

Fourthly, and last of the suggested advantages is the affective consideration. Language learning is challenging - not just in the more obvious production but on the receptive side too, and providing students the chance to control their own input (multiple aspects thereof, including genre, level, length and text repetitions) is likely to result in an affective reduction. Simply providing learners with more autonomy than they would ordinarily have in a traditional teacher-fronted classroom, and to allow students to have their own respective individual choices in controlling how they listen to texts is likely to be helpful for students.

#### **5. Cognitive argument (2)—The mind's 'voice' while reading**

This fifth and final of the theories listed here derives from relatively recent theoretical discussions. Reading is posited as a psycholinguistic activity necessarily requiring phonological representations of the printed text in order for the readers to represent meaning to themselves. This Implicit Prosody (IP) Hypothesis, as originally promulgated by Fodor (1998) suggests that readers internally 'voice' the text while engaging in reading. This was recently argued for by Stephens (2011) and empirical support for the IP Hypothesis was discussed by Taguchi, Gorsuch, Lems & Rosszell (2016), noting that the investigations of both Alexander and Nygaard (2008) and Gross et al (2013) lend support to the IP Hypothesis - that learners do hold previously obtained auditory information over to reading, and that learners do voice internally. At this early stage, the literature is indicative rather than conclusive, but is suggestive of a need to provide learners with more aural support either during or prior to reading.

### **8. Combining reading and listening**

In Table 1 above, the two skills and the two approaches can be seen to be distinct, but how about combining listening and reading? Would this aid learning or might input in two modalities be excessive for students - an input surplus, and a concomitant cognitive overload? Multi-modal input has seen a recent increase in attention, particularly in the last decade, seen for example in Brown, Waring & Donkaewbua (2008); Chang and Millet (2014), Cheetham (2017); Nakashima, Stephens and Kamata (2018) and Woodall (2010). Brown et al (2008) denote 'reading-while-listening' as a form of extensive reading, and it is useful to note this relative primacy of these two skills - we can probably expect students to be stronger with the written text than with the aural provision, and that the listening is seen as being supportive of the written (printed) text, rather than vice versa. Suggested is that this approach helps language learners to make sense within bigger chunks of auditory language than in single words (citing Amer, 1997; Dhaif, 1990 and Day & Bamford, 1998) and that this approach can help to improve concentration on language input study, with students eventually reaching the point of reading ahead of the spoken input (citing Smith, 1997). That said, Takaesu (2013) below, in using TED Talks, notes the use of text supporting listening, so while noting the likely use of relative skill strengths, the skills can naturally be viewed as working both ways, and this may depend on overall course aims, individual lesson aims, and how teachers choose to approach usage of the two modalities.

## 9. How to undertake Extensive Listening

Finally, the present paper very briefly introduces ways to undertake Extensive Listening. There are multiple alternatives, and assorted paid and free options available, as with Extensive Reading, and curriculum designers and teachers have decisions to make regarding practical issues such as cost, ease of use, student tracking and the materials available when choosing. Regarding the listening materials, syllabus designers and teachers should look at the volume of materials available to learners, levels (variously levelled by complexity and by vocabulary), genres, and likely interest of texts to students. Listed below are three EFL options to get teachers started, all chosen for their ease of use:

### 1. English Listening Lesson Library Online

This is a free collection of over 2500 lessons. The website has been in operation for over a decade and is made by a Japan-based university teacher. Materials are available at three different levels. The site is easy to search, by skill area, topic and level. Appendix A contains a simple record sheet I had previously made for use with ELLLO. This can be used in hard copy, or can be managed digitally (for example sharing to students via a cloud service such as Google Drive or Dropbox, and with students submitting completed record sheets likewise).

### 2. TED Talks

There is abundant material available online, most obviously on YouTube, but as has been said about the internet as a whole, finding something relevant and useful can be akin to trying to take a sip of water to drink from a fire hydrant. We need to be discerning for our learners with regard to language complexity, length of text, and any language support that may be provided. Anything otherwise is likely to result in the affectively adverse - high levels of inaccessible material may well demotivate, however well-meaning.

One approach that is seen used at a number of universities is the use of TED Talks. TED Talks are time-limited themed talks, generally given by acknowledged experts in their respective fields. There is a large range available, but overall these may be more suitable for higher level students, and students at the present institution, Kobe Shoin, may struggle initially with this as a proposed EL resource.

Takaesu (2013) describes her approach using TED Talks, arguing the effectiveness of Extensive Listening as an approach in terms of 'real' listening, and in terms of student motivation, at International Christian University in Tokyo. The stated pedagogical aim of using TED Talks was twofold - improving listening skills, and of providing enjoyable and informative listening in lecture form (p.152). One issue noted by Takaesu however is the use of Japanese-language subtitles - that students may simply be relying on reading in L1. The author suggests a suitable approach to get the best from using TEDTalks (p.157):

1. Watch without any text support
2. Watch and try to take notes
3. Read transcript, in target language - try to get overall meaning
4. More directed focus on language - use dictionary for word meanings, and practice pronunciation of new words
5. Listen again minus transcript

It should be noted that the author does not suggest using L1 subtitles, but instead to use the target language full transcript as support.



### 3. English Central

This is a paid service, offered by a company based in Japan. Students obtain paid subscriptions through their universities. The online program offers short video chunks for students to practice their listening (and reading alongside), and also vocabulary and speaking skills. Students can use on PCs or on their smartphones. The English Department of Kobe Shoin Women's University introduced this in the 'Essential Study Skills' course in Academic Year 2019–20 (as of writing, the current academic year). This will be the subject of a future more in-depth paper.

## 10. Final words

Extensive Reading has grown as a distinct sub-field, particularly within the last three decades. Noting the surge in papers cited above published within just the last decade, it can be seen that this is a growing area, and it seems reasonable to expect that Extensive Listening will continue to grow in terms of the volume of research literature. For the present author, Extensive Listening happily combines two aspects - the literature is suggestive (but not conclusive) (regarding effectiveness, and the approach is intuitively appealing. Further research can be expected within the area of listening-while-reading, and I suspect that this may yet be shown to be a language learning 'super-power'.

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## Appendix A

### Student Extensive Listening Record Sheet for ELLLO.org

| Listening Log: ELLLO.org Record Sheet |        |   |
|---------------------------------------|--------|---|
| # _____ Name: _____                   |        | Week: ____ /15  |
| Date                                  | Unit # | Title; New phrases and words – in sentences, with translations, with definitions<br>(as you prefer – how do <b>you</b> learn best?) |
|                                       |        | Title:  |
|                                       |        | Title:  |
|                                       |        | Title:  |
|                                       |        | Title:  |
|                                       |        | Title:  |

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