

Towards Self-Directed Listening Learning: Value of Weekly Collaborative Study Sessions

Cynthia Edwards & Mutsuko Aoki

Abstract

本稿はリスニングプロジェクトの成果について論じる。学生達がクラス授業で養成されない英語学習の取り組み方の必要性を常に考察してきた。プロジェクトの一環として、1年間週1回昼休み20分間共同英語リスニング学習を試行してきた。その期間に事前/事後テスト、面談、調査等を実施し、被験者グループのリスニングに対する姿勢、リスニング能力に関するデータを集め、分析をした。リスニング学習における自律性の成功、有効性についての研究と信条から生じる洞察力を提示する。

This study is based on a listening project that is an outcome of ongoing research addressing the need to prepare students for English study beyond the classroom. Included are details of a weekly twenty-minute collaborative listening study session conducted at lunchtime at the authors' college language laboratory over one academic year. Data were gathered and analyzed on the students' change in listening ability and attitude toward listening learning through pretesting and posttesting, teacher observation, interviews, and surveys. Insights stemming from the research and beliefs

about effective self-direction and its value in listening learning are presented.

Background research

At the authors' institution, Hokkaido Musashi Women' Junior College, a self-directed listening learning program was established with the following goals and predicted outcomes: students would 1) further their listening skills and 2) develop awareness and know-how for independent study, while the teachers would come to a better understanding of 1) the nature of independent study and 2) the roles of learners and teachers in self-directed learning (Edwards & Aoki, 1999). It was believed that students would be able to carry out sustained and effective self-directed study if learning know-how and affective factors were duly considered and efforts were taken to foster the need for students' understanding of what, why, and how they learn toward the acceptance of responsibility for their own learning (e.g., Holec, 1981; Little & Dam, 1998).

Subsequent research (Edwards & Aoki, 2000) results indicated that students' success with self-directed listening study was dependent not on their language ability, as had been assumed, but on affect and learning know-how. Clear distinctions existed between students who had been able to make sustained and effective efforts and those who had not. It was observed that successful learners 1) were satisfied with learning they controlled themselves, 2) chose materials at

their own level, 3) understood how to use texts and do practices, 4) saw progress, 5) made clear and reachable goals, and 6) talked about their learning. In contrast unsuccessful learners 1) were discouraged when they did not understand, 2) saw no progress, 3) kept few or no records of their learning, 4) could not find study time, 5) had difficulty arranging their schedules to study, and 6) hesitated to seek help.

Purpose

Based on these results, a weekly listening learning session was begun in an attempt to nurture successful learners. The study investigates the effect of this weekly listening learning session on students' listening comprehension skills and listening learning skills.

Method

Subjects: The experimental group was composed of ten first-year English Literature majors who stayed the course and remained to take the posttest. They were at a high beginner language level. Within the English department, they ranked in the mid- to low range according to the freshmen English placement test carried out at the start of the school year in April. Among these students many of them had clearly indicated goals. Of particular note was the fact that nearly half of them were in the teacher-training course to be junior high school English teachers. Among them also were students

planning to go to England for a three-week language and culture study trip at the completion of the academic year.

The students were solicited during the initial week of the school year through a bulletin board announcement of the lunchtime listening session. Although the appeal was directed to first-year students in all three departments (General Education, English Literature, and Economics) who wanted to actively address their low listening skill levels, only English major students joined the group. Introductory meetings were held during which they were asked to commit themselves to the study session for the entire year and to taking the pretest and posttest.

The control group consisted of 112 first-year students in the English Literature Department. They were from all three English ability levels (high, mid, and low) according to the department-wide placement test for incoming freshman and had the same required English curriculum as the experimental group, including basic skills and grammar courses.

Instrumentation: Pretesting was done within the first month of the school year and posttesting occurred nine months later during the first two weeks of December just before winter recess. An in-house listening test of fifty problems of five types was used (Edwards & Aoki, 1999). Results were compiled and descriptive statistics were generated for analysis and comparison. Low sample numbers in the experimental group precluded the use of advanced statistical

analysis that would allow significance levels in the differences between means of the groups to be established and reliable generalizations to be made.

Ongoing feedback was gathered on a weekly basis through observation and student comments during the weekly listening sessions detailed in the next section of this paper. Intermittent discussions, interviews, and a final survey were conducted to collect qualitative data for analyses.

Twenty-Minute Weekly Listening Session

The weekly twenty-minute listening session was created as a laboratory for learning listening in a cooperative and supportive atmosphere which would allow for the following key issues to be addressed: goal setting and clarifying, using peers as a resource, planning and time management, sustaining efforts, keeping up confidence, and balancing independent study with class work. In this context, the role of teacher was 1) to provide a listening learning situation with teacher support; 2) to provide an easily accessible practice situation; 3) to ensure students had opportunities to speak (in response to students' self-reported needs for learning listening); 4) to create a supportive community of peers so the students would keep their confidence and feel a sense of worth and accomplishment for their efforts; and 5) since it was outside of the curriculum and ungraded, to allow students to reflect on and evaluate their own listening learning. The collaborative approach, described in the following sections,

was chosen over a totally self-directed one, because it had become clear that for these students a do-it-yourself approach would eventually be the right one, but not at the initial stages in their development as self-directed learners (Kohonen 1992).

Materials: It was found that the combination of text and video worked best to give a context for meaning. In order to maximize the listening focus and to avoid dependency on the teachers from the start, the level had to be below the students' understanding threshold. Materials with situational conversations and/or familiar topics directly pertinent to student goals were deemed essential. Specifically, the topics focused on travel and daily life abroad. (See list of materials)

Scheduling: The session was held for twenty minutes during the fifty-minute lunchtime. It began at promptly five minutes after the start of lunch, giving students just enough time to reach the language lab. It ended with enough time left (twenty-five minutes) for the students to eat and be on time for their next class. The day of the week was carefully chosen to avoid overloading an already full daily schedule of four or five classes a day with almost no unscheduled time for both students and teachers.

Communication: Students and teachers communicated about schedule changes and other procedural matters through a

bulletin board next to the entrance to the lab. Students were advised to check it at least once a week. Group discussions were held during the lunchtime sessions especially before and after school holidays when attention to study tended to wane. The students were asked to discuss goals and other topics, for example, how they planned to study over the holidays and what ways they had found useful when doing out-of-school listening study activity. The teachers made themselves available to the students at their offices with office hours clearly posted.

Session procedures: Each session began promptly at 12:15 with the closing of the language laboratory door. Each student logged into the CALL system and received the print-out of the one-page lesson. They viewed the lesson's video, responded to four or five comprehension questions about the conversation, and got immediate feedback on their answers. Next was pair practice with headsets on, and then from their seats was a pair presentation so that everyone could hear. Both teachers monitored the students' language, especially pronunciation. At the same time, the students were able to monitor each other. This was followed by a quick three-minute section during which one or two language usage or pronunciation points were highlighted on the white board by the native-speaker (NS) teacher. Following this, the students did repair work on their pronunciation concluding with a pair performance in the front of the room. When there was an odd

number, the NS teacher would pair off with one of the students. The non-native speaker (NNS) teacher remained stationed at the console until the final role play at which time she would set up the props and direct the students. The session always ended just at 12:35 and the students were free to go or remain and chat about the session.

As described, the weekly sessions were simple, straight forward, and undemanding. Yet it was of great concern that they stay interesting for the students. Each session had moments of spontaneity and uniqueness, particularly when the NS teacher focused on problem points. For this, the NS teacher anticipated which pronunciation point may need fine tuning, but monitored first to confirm whether the assumption was true or not. Another example of a focus point was when the language in the text seemed un-natural or inappropriate. To save on time, the responses for the fill-in-the blank exercise were already filled in so the students could concentrate on the listening and the pair practice. When the lesson had a number of unfamiliar words or idioms, the Japanese translation was provided by the NNS teacher to eliminate the distraction caused by not knowing the meaning. The approach was adapted according to what the students suggested or what was thought would be an effective and logical change after post-session reflections.

Results

In this section of the paper the data gathered by each of the instruments will be presented and analyzed.

Pretest and posttest:

Table 1 Descriptive statistics: pretest/posttest results of experimental and control groups

group	n	test	mean	SD	mode	median	High/low range	Gain score mean	Gain score High/low
Experimental	10	pre	61.80	5.69	62	62	70/54	5.40	14/-2
		post	67.20	7.13	76	69	76/56		
Control	112	pre	59.43	12.35	66	60	80/28	7.39	44/-22
		post	66.84	11.31	66	67	84/44		

Overall test results on Table 1 indicate the similar nature of the experimental group whose pretest statistical values are nearly the same at about 62 percent, and with a comparatively low figure for standard deviation at 5.69. This group's internal consistency is further shown by the narrow ranges for the mean scores of both tests (16 points and 20 points) and gain scores (16 points), which were considerably less than the ranges for the control group mean scores (52 points and 40 points) and gain score (66 points). The control group has great variation in values for the descriptive statistics and, as indicated, a wide range of means and gain scores, indicating considerable differences in performance level within this group.

While the experimental group has somewhat higher pre/posttest mean scores than the control group, at about 62 and 67 versus roughly 60 and 67 for the control group, and slightly higher median scores (Figure 1), the mean gain score is lower. The control group has a higher average gain score of nearly two points, however the range of the gain scores fluctuates wildly within a wide range, as indicated.

The numbers and percentages of students scoring in the zero or negative range are shown in Table 2. The experimental group figure for this is 20 percent and the control group figure is 27 percent for students showing either no change or a score decrease on the posttest.

Table 2 % of Ss showing either no gain or regression on posttest by group

group	zero gain score		negative gain score		total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Experimental	1	10	1	10	2	20
Control	9	8	21	19	30	27

(percentage values were rounded)

Analysis: The experimental group averaged higher than the control group on both the pretest and posttest, however the differences were only one or two percentage points. At the same time the average gain score of these students who participated in the weekly listening study sessions was almost two percentage points lower. Without the benefit of statistical tests to establish significance in the differences of the mean score, these results are not conclusive. The small size of the

experimental group would not allow for reliable data to be generated to establish the efficacy of the weekly listening study sessions on listening skill. As it stands, the differences in the test scores with the control group could be the result of chance and not one of the treatment.

It can be observed from the test data, however, that the experimental group is somewhat cohesive in that the standard deviation from the mean is comparatively low. On the posttest, there was little or no regression compared to the control group. We see that as a group they moved in a positive direction at a higher percentage rate than the control but to a lesser degree.

Discussion: The experimental group tends to be a middling group in terms of rank within the English department in addition to the degree of listening level improvement on the listening test. The group contains no one scoring at either extreme and no one ranked highly within the department. It may be concluded that students who fall within the middle ranks are the ones for which this type of collaborative study has an appeal. They perhaps recognize their lack of skill and possess the will to improve, but not the knowledge of how to be successful in their goals for learning English.

Teacher observations of the weekly study sessions: Attitudes towards the listening study session were generally positive and were reflected by the students in various ways. They were

punctual, attended regularly, and expressed concern about other members in this regard, as well. They were attentive, stayed on task, but asked few questions. Nevertheless, the students did not appear lost or disengaged from the material. They used each other as pronunciation models. In doing so, they appeared to acknowledge each other's skill and accuracy. Students showed more understanding of English pronunciation and noticeably improved from week to week; they monitored and repaired their pronunciation themselves; they also placed stress more accurately. Most appeared more confident and comfortable speaking in front of the group and indicated so in their feedback. And as time went on, students undertook to add their own suggestions for how they would like the session to be run.

Student feedback on the weekly study sessions: During a round-table type feed back session the students reported that the twenty minutes were spent very effectively and that they did not mind sacrificing lunchtime to do it. There was “no time to get bored”; they stayed engaged the entire time. The content was “enough for the time”. They also remarked positively about getting quick feedback on the their responses and pronunciation. They found the language useful and practical and the topics pertinent to their interests and goals. They felt their comprehension level improved over time. They were comfortable with each other to the point that one student specifically remarked that everyone was “friendly”.

Student survey and results: To investigate students' perceptions of their listening learning specifically and to measure the relative importance of the weekly listening learning sessions, the experimental group students were asked to choose what they thought were the two most effective listening learning situations that they had experienced during the entire school year. The choices were courses with a listening component: 1) Oral English, 2) Listening Skills, and 3) Phonology. Out-of-class listening learning opportunities were 1) the weekly listening study sessions and 2) assigned listening study using video materials in the CALL laboratory, as part of the Listening Skills coursework. The number of responses is low because a few students selected only one choice and some students were absent from the session when asked to respond. The results are summarized below with the number of students who cited them:

weekly listening session (6)

assigned study with video in the CALL laboratory (6)

Phonetics class (1)

Oral English class (1)

The weekly listening session was cited by six students as the most effective situation for listening learning. The reasons were: 1) enjoyment; 2) small group allows for individual instruction and advice; 3) pair speaking practice; 4) friendly

group atmosphere; 5) materials contain practical expressions for travel. The assigned video-based listening independent study in the CALL lab was chosen as often as the weekly listening session. Reasons given for its effectiveness were generally similar to those given for the weekly listening session, i.e. useful language, practical situations, and supportive study atmosphere.

It is interesting to note that the situations most commonly selected were choices which require a certain level of autonomy and self-direction rather than purely teacher-led ones. Although the numbers of students are small, this may be an indication that students are willing and able to take on more responsibility for their learning than perhaps teachers or the students themselves realize.

The second question that students were asked was which materials they had found worked best for them in listening study and how they hoped to continue listening study on their own. The following is the list of listening learning resources they generated:

Entertainments: music CDs, movie videos, movie DVDs,

TV dramas

Media: radio, NHK television, English newspapers

Prepared texts: listening test practice problems

Human resources: chats with native English-speaking teachers

As for how to study, most of the students indicated that setting aside a specific English study time was important and

that frequent practice was needed to improve their listening.

Through these responses, the students have indicated that they have improved their listening learning skills. They had little awareness of the broad possibilities for study media at the start of the listening study. However, after having a variety of listening learning experiences over the school year, they know what resources are available and are able to express what suits them individually.

Outcome: In the short term, we had expected that our experimental group of students would make significant gains on the listening posttest, however this was not the case. For the long term, however, it is expected that the listening group members' positive attitudes towards themselves as listening learners and listening learning skill will support increasingly more autonomous, self-directed listening study. Indeed, the impact on the students' listening performance in other classes was observable, although not substantiated by the research.

The twenty-minute sessions can be considered an intermediate step that fits into the continuum from dependence to independence in learning. The confidence-building value can be considerable and can overshadow the actual language skill that they gain. On the topic of self-direction, Michael Rost, listening textbook writer and author of works on collaboration in language learning, writes that "self-directed activities, in addition to classroom studies, nearly always lead to faster gains in proficiency and marked

increases in self-confidence and motivation” (Rost, 2002b). Though this research has not produced quantitative proof, it does lend further support to the debate on the impact of self-directed learning on the self-confidence and will of the student.

Conclusion

We have described how high-beginner-level students' efforts can be supported to improve their listening skills outside of the classroom through participation in a collaborative listening study session. In doing so, we have presented our insights and beliefs about collaboration as a step towards successful and effective self-direction in listening learning. We started out with the grossly over-simplified notion that listening skill development was just a matter of putting in the time and letting it happen, following the adage, the more you do it, the better you'll be at it. At the same time, we also had grossly oversimplified ideas of independent study as a self-supported lone effort. Among other factors, we have realized the complexity of our subject and encourage other researchers to add to the body of knowledge of listening skill development and self-direction in language learning. We have also realized that a general lack of understanding is perhaps at the root of many of the failed institutional or individual beginning efforts at listening skill improvement and self-directed study. We hope our study will serve our colleagues in their research endeavors on this theme.

Materials

Textbooks

- Fuller, D. & Fuller, L. (2001). *Essential Listening 2: Questions and Answers*. Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse
- Iba, M. & Ross, P. (Eds.). (2000). *English Masterbox: TOEIC Test Video Master Course Vol. 1*. Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse.
- Murakawa, H. (2000). *Sounds Right! Sounds Good!* Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse
- Ohyagi, H. & Kiggell, T. (1998). *Viva! San Francisco: Survival English Video*. Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse.
- Sato, K. (Ed.). (1997). *First Time Abroad*. Tokyo: Seibido

Video Recordings

- English Masterbox: TOEIC Test Video Master Course Vol 1*. Iba, Midori & Ross, Paul (Eds.). Macmillan Languagehouse, 2000. Videocassette.
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