

Listening beyond phonemes: Listening for meaning

by

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Abstract

This research project examined the listening section of the English language curriculum which primarily addressed bottom - up processes. Upon analysis, the authors revised the listening syllabus to better suit the needs of the students. Rather than choosing only a bottom-up approach, or only a top-down approach, the authors sought a compromise to address both needs. We also attempted to increase learner engagement through personal story telling which can be accessible, easily distributed, and easily supplemented through the Moodle learning management system. The project is called Listening for Meaning. This paper will discuss the method and explore the implementation of the supplementary material through analysis of feedback from both the students and the teachers who used the new materials.

Key Words: listening, English language education, top-down processing

1. Introduction

The purpose of this research project was to create a new listening activity for second year students at a private university of science and technology. These students do not major in English, but must take two years of compulsory English Communication classes. The project was created with the intention of improving students' listening skills by encouraging them to listen for the meaning of the text, rather than just individual words.

In the past, materials focused largely on bottom-up processing where students were given a

dictation and prompted to listen for discrete sounds and words. In these dictation activities, the focus was on identifying the words heard and filling in the blanks with correct spelling. It was noted that many students would complete these activities, but have little to no idea of what the dictations were about. While they deciphered each word, they often failed to interpret the overall meaning.

The teachers involved in this project wanted to facilitate more of a top-down approach to encourage students to listen for the main ideas. It was felt that this would be more beneficial for students' English learning development and help them not only with their listening skills, but their communication skills overall.

An additional aim was to make the material more relevant and engaging for the students to

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hopefully garner more interest in the material and, as a result, listen more intently for the meaning. These activities were also intended to be done in class with the possibility of doing follow-up activities after.

It is important to note that most of the activities created were based on true stories and experiences of the teachers for the purpose of engaging the students. About one-fifth of the activities were based on short video clips of other people's real experiences. Also, it was hoped that students would connect more with the teacher after hearing about his or her experiences.

With these aims in mind, the research team set about to create activities with a systematic procedure and a clear purpose in each step to guide students in listening for the meaning of the entire text, and not only individual words or sounds.

2. Literature Review

Siegel (2013) noted that "listening has been considered the most difficult of the four main language skills" (p. 22). It is a challenging skill for teachers to instruct because unlike reading, writing and even speaking, learners *appear* to acquire this skill without much instruction, attention, or effort. It can be quite difficult to assess listening skills without assessing production skills, such as speaking or writing.

2.1 Challenges

There are considerable difficulties faced by learners as well. Renandya and Farrell (2011) and Siegel (2013) illustrate the numerous challenges endured by learners when listening in a second language (L2). Students may experience frustration in approaching a spoken text that is difficult to parse and challenging to manipulate. In many instances, the learners have only one opportunity to listen unless they dare ask for repetition or clarification. Further confounding the problems in an L2 setting are potentially different phonemes,

different orthographic representations, and different speech conventions. An additional challenge is the dispiriting self-assessment faced by learners when they hear speech inside or outside the classroom that they are simply unable to process (Field, 2010).

2.2 Processing

Bottom-up processing is where the listener processes individual phonemes into words, words into phrases, and the phrases into units of meaning. Top-down processing, on the other hand, involves the use of larger units such as phrasal and sentential sequences as well as the context of the situation.

Rost (2011) explains that bottom-up processing is the work of the brain interpreting the speech signals whereas the top-down processing is the work of the brain interpreting the schemata associated with the speech. The challenge for teachers is how to assist learners in both types of processing.

2.3 A Middle Way?

Strategy training is attractive in that it clearly identifies the deficits faced by learners and attempts to remedy those deficits largely through activating appropriate schemata. There are legitimate concerns, however, that these strategies simply cannot compensate for inadequate bottom-up processing, regardless of the cause. A concern is that there must be *some* listening activities that can assist learners both in making meaning from the text and in developing their listening skills in general.

The authors propose a middle way that makes use of some optional listening strategies while also providing the repetition necessary to improve. The activity is located on a Moodle learning management system (LMS) that makes it much easier for teachers to administer. The activity is called Listening for Meaning (LFM).

3. Research Questions

The research questions for this project were the following:

- ① Are these materials accessible and comprehensible to students?
- ② Are these materials accessible and adaptable for other teachers to easily utilize in their own courses?
- ③ Can we encourage students to think about the meaning of the passage, and not only the individual words comprising the text?

4. Methodology

The research team of four teachers created 200 to 300 word texts related to the curriculum. Topics included describing people, health and education. Teachers also wrote more general texts not explicitly linked to the curriculum, but considered useful for English classes.

Teachers then recorded the text using the Audacity freeware program (version 2.1.3; Audacity Developer Team, 2017). It was important for teachers to record their own voices so that students could benefit from hearing the natural range of accents from the teachers' varied backgrounds. It was also an advantage that students could hear the authentic voice of their own teacher as well as other teachers they might meet on campus.

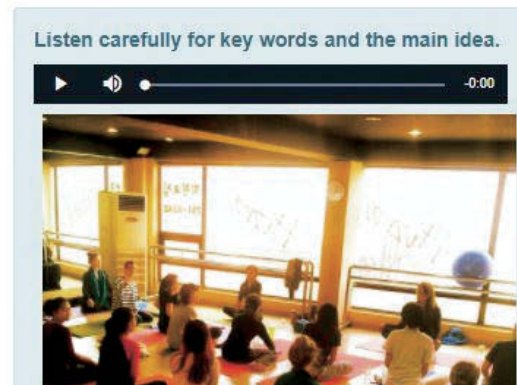
Teachers next created a flash card activity to prepare students to encounter new vocabulary. Teachers generally chose between five and ten words with which students might not be familiar. They created flash cards comprising these words, Japanese translations, and images using a paid version of Quizlet (2017).

Finally, comprehension questions related to the text were created. The purpose of these questions was to determine whether students understood the text they had just listened to.

4.1 Procedures

The resulting activities saw students working through the following steps:

1. Students listen for the first time at regular speed.



2. Next, students write any words that they heard and what they understood to be the main idea. Spelling is not important here.

What are five important words that you heard?

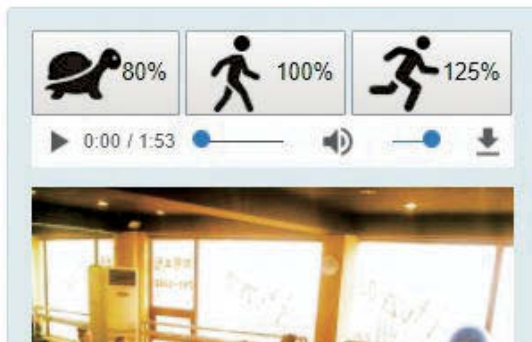
1.
2.
3.
4.
5.

What is the main point of the story?

3. Students study and learn important vocabulary using flash-cards through the embedded Quizlet program.



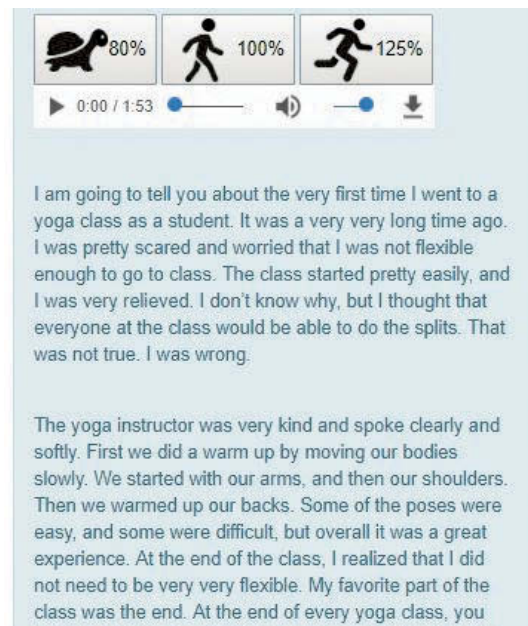
4. Students listen again. They have the option to listen at different speeds.



5. Students answer multiple choice comprehension questions about the listening passage. They receive immediate feedback to their answers.



6. Students listen again, reading the text as the audio is played. Students should listen particularly for answers to any questions they may have answered incorrectly.



7. Students have a chance to answer the same comprehension questions again, giving them an opportunity to retry any questions they may have originally answered incorrectly.



8. Lastly, students can review their answers. They can see any questions they got right or wrong. If they wish, students can redo the activity.

5. Data Collection & Analysis

After two semesters of trialing the activities, the team collected data from both teachers and students to evaluate aspects of ease of use, efficiency,

consistency, and appeal, among other concerns.

5.1 Data Collection - Teachers

Teacher feedback was collected from an anonymous Google Forms survey distributed via a web link. Teachers were encouraged to complete the short questionnaire through email, several reminders in general meetings, and personal reminders.

The four questions asked:

1. How many LFM Activities have you done with students this year?
2. What do you like about LFM activities?
3. Is there anything you dislike regarding LFM activities?
4. What can we do to improve LFM activities?

5.2 Data Analysis - Teachers

Of 16 teachers at the university who taught classes for which the LFM activities were available, 13 feedback forms were completed.

The teacher feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Sixteen LFM Activities were created, and of the thirteen responding participants, nine teachers used four or more activities. The team created a variety of activities with the anticipation that classes would use these activities once per month, or approximately three times each semester. The average usage was five activities per semester.

When asked what teachers appreciated regarding these activities, the following quotations from the open-ended responses are instructive.

Three responses touched on the points of listening skills. "Listening for Meaning is an important skill that is often overlooked because our students may put too much focus on individual words."

When asked to comment on how the activities can be improved, the following feedback was collected. Several teachers expressed frustration at the variable time required for students to complete

the activities. Since the activities are primarily student-centered, it is principally the responsibility of the student to complete each task at his or her own speed.

When asked what could be done to improve LFM activities, five out of the thirteen respondents asked for more activities. Two teachers asked for additional lower-level material, and another teacher asked for LFM to be used for the first-year curriculum.

5.3 Data Collection - Students

In addition to peer feedback from fellow teachers, the research group also collected anonymous feedback from students, again via Google Forms which were embedded into their Moodle course pages. Students were asked to answer four multiple choice items and one open-ended item immediately following the completion of an LFM activity. The items were all written in Japanese, however students had the option of responding to the final open-ended item in either English or Japanese.

The items were:

1. Who is your teacher?
2. What is your major/department?
3. How difficult was the story?
(Likert scale)
4. How interesting was the story?
(Likert scale)
5. What did you think about the story?
(open-ended)

Questionnaires were created for 16 different LFM activities, but teachers were free to choose and assign topics that fit with their classes. Consequently, not all activities were chosen or had adequate feedback. The highest number of questionnaire responses to one of the typical LFM activities ($N=57$) was for the activity entitled "Skiing Accident." The feedback for this activity was thus chosen for analysis.

5.4 Data Analysis - Students

There were 57 individual student responses collected over three classes and three majors. Regarding level of difficulty, students were asked to select from the following choices: 簡単すぎる [too easy], 簡単 [easy], 難しい [difficult], and 難しいすぎる [too difficult]. The feedback shows that 3.5% of respondents found the story too easy, 38.6% easy, 54.3% difficult, and 3.5% too difficult. It is encouraging that most students selected the middle two bands, with similar percentages finding the material either slightly challenging or easily accessible. These responses suggesting that an appropriate level of difficulty was probably achieved.

Regarding story appeal, students were asked to select from the following choices: つまらない [boring], 普通 [ordinary], 面白い [interesting], and すごく面白い [very interesting]. The data reveals that 3.5% of students found this story to be boring, 28% ordinary, 61.4% interesting, and 7% very interesting. That 68.4% of students reported the story to be either interesting or very interesting is encouraging. Overall, the student feedback suggests that the difficulty level and interest level were appropriate.

The students were finally required to respond in either English or Japanese to the following question: この話どう思いましたか? [What did you think of this story?]. Twenty-one students gave their responses in English and 36 in Japanese.

Seventeen of the open-ended responses appeared to comment on the interest level or difficulty of the story. Eight students said the story was “interesting,” three said “fun,” two wrote “good” or “good story,” two wrote “normal” or “so-so” and one student wrote “fantastic.”

Forty of the open-ended responses were clearly reactions to the story as opposed to an evaluation of the story’s appeal or difficulty. The research team was pleased to see students engaging with and reacting to the content of the story.

6. Discussion

6.1 Discussing Research Questions

The three research questions asked ① whether the new listening materials were accessible and comprehensible to students; ② whether teachers could easily use these materials; and ③ whether teachers can get students to think more carefully about the meaning of spoken text.

The generalizability of the data presented in the previous section is limited given the evaluation of just one of sixteen activities, a small sample size of students and teachers, and implementation at just one university. Nevertheless, the answers to all three research questions is “yes.” More than 90% of students indicated that the LFM activity was neither “too easy” nor “too difficult.” Most second-year teachers could use the LFM materials on multiple occasions and responded positively to them.

6.2 Time Management Suggestions

There were, of course, concerns, notably varied finishing times for students. This concern is not solely an LFM problem, but a difficulty of differentiated instruction for student-centered learning. It is, nevertheless, an important point to discuss. Possibilities for future development include providing additional activities for teachers to use to better manage lessons.

Optional activities might include further vocabulary practice with the terms used in the activity, a short reading activity related to the content, or a short journal entry related to students’ own experiences.

Another concern related to time is that some students spend too much time on particular tasks. One example is in step 2 where students write five key words and the main idea. At this point, students have only heard the listening selection once. Instead of writing only words, some students write full sentences or summaries instead of a short phrase for the main idea.

Before many of these activities, teachers may want to remind their students that this task is only asking them to quickly recall content. Teachers can do so by prepping the students before the LFM, doing this particular task together, reviewing this page of the activity as a class upon completion, or even simply by giving a word limit for the page.

Another task for which some students spent a lot of time was step 3, the vocabulary review. Here too, there are several possible solutions such as asking students to do only one or two types of the flash card reviews or giving students a time limit.

Regarding best practices, we feel that workshops or informal meetings where teachers can freely share their experiences and ideas is an excellent way of remedying concerns not just for LFM activities, but for many teaching matters.

7. Conclusion

Upon completion of the research project, the authors are happy to have created materials as well as the groundwork for producing more listening activities that address the needs of students at this university. For teachers who are interested in creating their own LFM activities, there is now a set framework with clear steps for each activity. It should be relatively easy for teachers to create and record their own stories.

Bottom-up processing and top-down processing are often confused as contrasting views or models, but in reality, both are usually necessary to get the full meaning of an utterance (Brown, 2011; Field, 2010). Though many established activities address either bottom-up or top-down processing, we believe we have created LFM activities that successfully facilitate both. It is our sincere hope that second-year students enjoy listening to these stories.

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