



Why Extensive Reading and Listening to Audio Books May not be Enough

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ABSTRACT

Studies of extensive reading and listening in East-Asian EFL contexts have shown promising results. The practice of extensive reading and listening to audio-books may lead to improved outcomes over the traditional methodology of translation from English to the L1. Nevertheless, the methodology of extensive reading and listening to audio-books may not in itself be adequate to assure the desired outcome of improvement in communicative English skills. Socio-cultural theory has identified the role of the interlocutor in the development of these skills. It is suggested that teachers access connections with English speaking interlocutors for their students, in order to extend gains made from Extensive reading and listening to audio-books.

INTRODUCTION

Socio-cultural theory asserts the importance of the interlocutor in the study of language. In response to the question of whether he subscribes to Saussure and Chomsky's view that linguistics belongs to the domain of psychology, Halliday asserts "for me linguistics is a branch of sociology. Language is a part of the social system" (1978, p.38-39). Vygotsky claims that learning occurs in the process of language socialization rather than simply being a solo act of information processing (Donato, 2000, p. 33). The Russian writers Bakhtin and Voloshinov, highlight "the inadequacy of any linguistics which is abstracted from the realities of real verbal (or written) interchange" (Dentith 1995, p. 38). According to Voloshinov "language is a continuous generative process implemented in the social-verbal interaction of speakers" (op.cit. p. 143). Nevertheless, while acknowledging the many differences between Chinese and Japanese classrooms, many of them are characterized by teacher-fronted delivery of lessons with limited expectations of the learners to talk in English. Commonalities include the preponderance of the teacher's detailed explanations of texts, and grammatical and translation exercises (see Nagatomo, 2012; Rao & Lei, 2014). Furthermore, Masuhara (2007) explains that this instructional style, in which the teacher lectures in the L1 to large classes, concentrating on vocabulary and grammar, is practiced in a range of countries within and outside East-Asia.

English has been deemed a necessary skill in the lead up to the 2020 Tokyo Olympics, and new efforts for the acquisition of communicative English are being pursued. An important pedagogical practice in Japan is Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books. The reason they are important is that they are an alternative to the traditional pedagogy of *yakudoku*, which refers to reading and translating texts from English to Japanese. Although translation of lexically dense passages from English to Japanese is still required in highly competitive exams for entrance to prestigious universities such as the graduate school of Kyoto University, the contrasting technique of Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books is gaining popularity in Japanese high schools and universities.

Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books can therefore be considered a striking departure from the traditional pedagogy of intensive reading. Day and Bamford (1998, p. 123) in their landmark exposition contrast intensive and extensive reading; the former stresses accuracy while the latter stresses fluency. The former requires translation and answering questions while the latter is pursued to get

information and enjoyment. The former stresses words and pronunciation whereas the latter focuses on meaning. The former refers to texts which are difficult, short, and to be read slowly whereas the latter to texts which are easy, extensive, and to be read quickly. The former refers to texts which must be finished, whereas the latter to texts which are only to be finished if the student chooses to do so. The former requires use of the dictionary whereas the latter does not.

SUPPLEMENTING EXTENSIVE READING WITH AUDIO-BOOKS

Accordingly, Extensive Reading stresses both the quantity and the ease of reading. It has a long history, having first been proposed by Harold Palmer, one of the pioneers of second language teaching, in 1917. Currently it is often supported with the complementary process of listening to audio-books. Reading and listening can be practiced either simultaneously or consecutively. The audio-books are a means of supplying the prosodic features of spoken English which are absent from the written text. They may need to be identified for learners of English, who cannot superimpose rhythm and intonation onto the written word without a memory of spoken English. Masuhara (2007) argues that even advanced learners may not possess similar auditory images to competent L1 readers, and therefore reading pedagogy must supply this. Halliday (1985, p.49) asserts the importance of the auditory component explaining that intonation is part of the grammatical system. Tench (1981) argues that errors in intonation receive least sympathy from native speaking interlocutors, because the written language does not represent intonation, and they “may not be at all so conscious of the crucial role of intonation in their own speech” (p.96). Accordingly the audio-book can be considered an indispensable aid in informing students of the critical features of rhythm and intonation which are not apparent from the written word.

The practice of Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books has numerous advantages, and is likely to be useful for speakers of non-cognate languages to English; the extensive nature of the exposure compensates for the decreased possibilities of positive transfer from typologically distant L1's. Recent studies in Taiwan have demonstrated gains in listening fluency from reading while listening to audio-books. (eg: Chang 2009, Chang 2011, Chang & Millet, 2014). The strength of this approach is that it promotes the simultaneous processing of English in its natural order without resort to translation. Nevertheless, written English is the result of careful revisions and redrafting (Halliday 1985), and the effort that has gone into its construction is not apparent to the reader. If students' main sources of English input are Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books, their exposure is largely limited to text which has been redrafted.

Clearly it is difficult to transfer the gains from intensive reading for entrance examinations into communicative English skills; the gains from extensive reading and listening lend themselves more readily to such a kind of transfer. Nevertheless, even extensive reading and listening to audio-books may be inadequate in supporting the attainment of communicative English skill, defined here to be that which “prioritises authentic, spoken language” (Mickan, 2013, p. 20). Even further innovation may be required if students are to extend the gains made from Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SPOKEN ENGLISH

The distinctive features of spoken English also merit attention. Halliday (1985) argues that it is erroneous to regard the spoken word as somehow less complex than the written form: “The idea that spoken language is formless, confined to short bursts, full of false starts, lacking in logical structure, etc. is a myth- and a pernicious one at that, since it prevents us from recognizing its critical role in learning” (p. 100). He explains that both speech and writing are complex, but that they are complex in different ways. The former is “dynamic and intricate” whereas the latter is “static and dense” (p.87). Halliday contrasts the grammatical complexity of speech with the lexical complexity of writing. He describes the density of speech as “intricacy of movement, liquid like that of a rapidly running river”, whereas writing is “density of substance, solid like that of a diamond formed under pressure” (ibid). Numerous examples of the “dynamic and intricate” nature of spoken English grammar are also demonstrated by Carter (2007), obtained from computer corpora; these include restatement of the subject of a sentence as a pronoun, ellipsis of subjects and verbs when both interlocutors can infer them

from the context, discourse markers such as ‘anyway’ and ‘right’ to indicate topic boundaries, purposefully vague language such as ‘thing’, ‘stuff’ and ‘sort of’, and modal expressions such as ‘possibly’, ‘probably’, and ‘I suppose’ to soften an utterance. The lexical complexity of writing is characterized by nominalization, which allows complex notions to be conveyed succinctly. For example, the noun ‘familiarity’ may be expressed in spoken English as expressed as ‘something which is familiar’ (Hammond, 1990).

It is likely that Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books may not provide students with adequate exposure to the grammatical complexity of spoken English. These programs may be based on the assumption that students can generalize from written English and audio-books to comprehension of authentic spoken English. Clearly, participation in a community of English speakers is also necessary. Nuttall’s classic work (1996) provides a range of tasks to support reading skills, which involve both spoken and written language. Speaking skills include drama, simulation and role play, and debate and discussion. Writing skills include reassembling information, transferring information into figures, and providing summaries.

In addition, digital communication can provide the opportunity for students to co-construct conversations with English speakers. This already occurs with the use of social media for those students who take advantage of it. Pollard (2015) has demonstrated how messaging apps can be implemented in the English classroom in order to provide interactive opportunities in both speaking and writing. Forsythe (2013) explains how teachers can help students to access language exchanges with interlocutors abroad.

CONCLUSION

It is timely to draw students’ attention to grammatically complex spoken texts. The practice of Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books deserves to be supplemented with more opportunities for learners to use the language interactively. Learners should be given the opportunity to participate as interlocutors rather than simply passively witness others’ conversations. The digital age has finally enabled interaction with the interlocutor, one of the essential features of communication, possible for those in distant locations, and this resource deserves to be exploited. Learners of English can extend their gains from Extensive Reading and listening to audio-books, if they are provided with opportunities to co-construct spoken language. Learners of English will benefit from the practice taken for granted by other English speakers, of exploiting English as a semiotic resource.

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