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Reading-Listening and Reading Circles: Bimodal Approaches Building Fluency¹

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ABSTRACT

Fluency in L2 reading often seems a distant goal, and pleasure in the experience of L2 reading even more unattainable. This study investigated comparative EFL reading projects for university-age learners, using graded literature at one university and an authentic memoir at a second. The study explored whether integrating listening to audiobooks along with reading (bimodal input) outside class-time, with follow-up reading circles in class, could improve L2 reading experiences for the students. The survey results from the semester-length projects in four courses showed listening to audiobooks, whether preceding, simultaneously with, or after reading was consistently credited by the learners for self-observed improvements in skills. Learners indicated that reading and listening to L2 English was eased by the experience of autonomous outside-class listening and reading, and a majority found reading circles valuable. The integrated projects gained high approval with participants overall. The results suggest that L2 learners at various levels of reading fluency can benefit from bimodal options to support building their skills, and opportunities to share and discuss meaningful stories with peers can improve learners' L2 reading experiences. Patterns in participants' choices for input integration offer implications for further study and reading fluency-building applications.

Keywords: audiobooks and reading, autonomous L2 listening, bimodal input, book clubs, L2 reading fluency, reading circles, simultaneous listening and reading

INTRODUCTION

Issues and background

Being able to read fluently “for their own purposes” (Gorsuch, Taguchi, & Umehara, 2015, pp. 18-19) is justifiably considered essential for empowered second language learners. Fluency and pleasure in second language reading, however, often seem like distant goals

(Tomlinson, 1998), particularly when the learners' first and second languages are linguistically distant and the second language is little-heard in the learners' surroundings. Bimodal reading, however, such as reading while listening or using other congruent dual-sensory supports, is increasingly being recognized as a bridge to independence (Cheetham, 2017). Tomlinson (1998) argues for bimodal input such as reading aloud to help second language learners toward better experiences with reading, and denounces learners being "restricted to a uni-dimensional representation of the text" (p. 178) by silent reading. He points out that what amounts to sensory deprivation in second language reading instruction "leads to reading frustration and failure and an unwillingness to read outside or after the course" (p. 184) and defines the stakes at hand: "If you read forever you can continue to learn forever" (p. 184).

Recent brain studies show neuro-linguistic foundations for these observations and for approaching second language literacy with more of our sensory capabilities engaged. In a comprehensive overview, Cheetham (2017) explores converging studies in neuroscience, psychology, language learning, and applied linguistics regarding bimodal input in various combinations. Some research, such as that done by Calvert, Campbell, and Brammer (2000), quantifies benefits of 30-80% greater "bimodal response enhancement" (p. 651) than found by simply adding inputs' effects together. Combined inputs are not a matter of simple reinforcement – they are integrative and accrue beyond the measures of the individual inputs taken together. Furthermore, as discussed in Cheetham (2017, pp. 10-16) related studies now show these effects build with experience. Studies relevant to reading indicate that integrated, simultaneous neural activation of auditory areas when reading is part of normal development in reading skill, and may be required to develop fluent, comfortable reading competencies (Cheetham, 2017, p. 12). For second and foreign language learners with little of the target language in their surroundings and resulting unevenness in skills, Cheetham notes that bimodal inputs "allow the development of the integration needed to bootstrap the weaker skill" (p. 15).

Empirical studies with language learners in classrooms have borne out this research and offer evidence and practical examples for bringing bimodal resources to second language (L2) learners. Gorsuch, Taguchi, and Umehara (2015) found significant effects in both reading rates and recall, from using a four-step classroom reading process. First language (L1) English students studying L2 Japanese first read a passage, then asked questions as needed. Second, they listened to their instructor reading aloud, while reading along. This simultaneous listening and reading was done twice. The students then read silently again twice more, confirming understanding and building their reading speeds. Lastly, they wrote follow-up comments about their practice. Chang and Millett (2015) showed in a year-long comparative study of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) students that bimodal input through audiobook listening, simultaneously supporting high school learners' reading, led to significant differences and sustainable increases in reading speeds and comprehension skills in their bimodal treatment group. Similar to the Gorsuch, Taguchi, and Umehara (2015) study, this research involved students crossing great linguistic distances, in this case, from Chinese to English. A parallel study by Kartal and Simsek (2017) investigated combined reading and audiobook listening for EFL university students in Turkey, and found complementary results: significant gains in listening comprehension, and all participants feeling gains in reading as well. Other benefits the

authors discovered show evidence of meaningful empowerment, such as learners' autonomous plans to use listening and reading together in the future.

Simultaneous reading and listening has, meanwhile, become a more practical, available option for language learners, offering an avenue for autonomous audio-supported reading outside classroom hours and supporting increased engagement with reading in a second or foreign language. While evidence has been building for bimodal listening and reading (Chang & Millett, 2015; Cheetham, 2017; Kartal & Simsek, 2017; Stephens, 2017; Walter, 2008; Woodall, 2010) and for repeated listening and reading (Gorsuch, Taguchi, & Umehara, 2015), studies are still lacking which examine autonomous combinations of these elements by learners themselves and which investigate their resulting preferences. Depending on a learner's individual reading speed and listening proficiency, truly fitting simultaneous input speeds may be a challenge to set. This would seem to be a pressing issue, when considering that the process of gaining language skills naturally presents moving targets in terms of comfortable listening speeds and manageable reading speeds. Unless learners together in a classroom are in closely matched stages of development, learner autonomy in controlling and possibly, alternating between listening and reading sessions might be an important option to offer.

This paper reports on a study exploring both simultaneous reading and listening, and alternative routes for building reading fluency using bimodal input, supported by collaborative in-classroom reading circles. The study aimed to investigate, in comparative conditions, whether autonomously-controlled bimodal input and classroom social support through reading circles could improve learners' EFL reading experiences and promote more comfortable reading fluency. A primary question would be if strategies introduced and explored during the study period would be found useful enough by the learners to be considered for their future independent use. The study also sought evidence of patterns in learner strategy preferences. Patterns becoming apparent in participants' choices for comfortable and effective bimodal input might pose possibilities for closer investigation and hopefully, second and foreign language reading fluency-building applications.

Research Questions:

1. Would students find combining reading and listening outside class followed by reading circles in class to be helpful for improving their skills?
2. Would they feel positive enough about their semester projects to answer affirmatively about possible future, autonomous choices: "Do you think you will want to **listen** to another English book in the future?"
3. Are any patterns discernable in the timing of activities and combining of listening and reading preferred by the students?

METHODOLOGY

The overall framework was based on Norton (2013) and Creswell's (2014) discussions of empowering research in which participants are fully informed collaborators, whose input and insights are valued and who should benefit from the efforts they choose to invest in a study or

research project. Control groups therefore were not attempted because the learners were agreeing to undertake the effort these projects involved with the expectation that they would together be exploring the best strategies the instructor could suggest, under their own control.

Participants

The participating students were first- and second-year university students enrolled in two universities in central Japan. One university had English classes supplementing a Preschool Education major: the students were mainly high-beginners in English and also mostly female. The other university had English reading courses in an International Communications major, and students averaged at more intermediate English levels; this was an all-female department. There were four courses in all; a first and a second-year course in the Preschool Education curriculum (61 students), and a first and a second-year course in the International Communications curriculum (39 students). The differences in student numbers were due to contrasting university policies toward language education and class size, otherwise the demographics of the students and the classroom settings were similar. From all four classes permission was requested and received from the students for the instructor to gather information relevant to the projects, aimed towards improving understanding of second language learning and effective pedagogical practice, without personal identification or other identifying details.

Procedures

In each of the four classes, the instructor and students discussed some of the challenges of reading English as a foreign language. As noted in Masuhara (2007), there are particular difficulties faced in learning to read English fluently without having had a childhood matching up the aural with the orthographic versions of the language (pp. 17-18): “In English ... the correspondence between grapheme and phoneme is not straightforward... [and] some irregular words completely elude phonemic sense as in ‘yacht’!” (p. 21). Many L1 English reading adults would, in fact, agree, and readily recall words with unexpected spellings and lack of correspondence between spoken and written forms which startled or even stymied them as young readers.

Second, the classes tried out options for reading and listening which they might want to use in their upcoming projects. The instructor supplied short passages and the students tested three conditions together: reading only, listening only (with the target paragraph blanked out), or reading and listening simultaneously. Feedback slips were then collected from the class members about their preferences in the demonstration. Quickly counting the slips, the instructor shared the results immediately for the students to discuss. Most, though not all, had found the simultaneous reading and listening condition to be the most comfortable. Introducing relevant studies (see particularly Chang & Millett, 2014, 2015; Masuhara, 2007), the instructor explained recent research regarding simultaneous reading and listening to stories for language learners like themselves (as suggested in Van Amelsvoort, 2017). Informed investment was the goal of this

explanation because, again, this was not an experiment but rather a full-semester effort the students were beginning. The instructor then outlined the present project: reading and listening to an English book, given the strong likelihood that bimodal input could be both comfortable (as many had just found, themselves), and helpful in building sustainable skills. The instructor also shared some unanswered questions for the students to consider while carrying out their projects. While emphasizing that simultaneous reading and listening had been found reliably effective (Chang & Millett, 2014, 2015; Kartal & Simsek, 2017; Stephens, 2017), the instructor discussed alternatives which had also been found helpful by some learners, such as alternating between reading and listening. If, while students carried out their own self-experimenting with simultaneous or alternating conditions, they noted their impressions, they might add to both their own and possibly wider understanding of options learners might utilize when building reading skills and fluency.

In the following weeks, the Preschool Education department students read and listened to a CD with an approximately twenty-minute recording of the illustrated original graded reader story *A Faraway World* by Maria Banfi (ELI publishers, 2010). *A Faraway World* was chosen because it was popular with previous students and the story relates the mutual adjustments and broadening perspectives of middle school classmates. The text is supported by artwork clearly illustrating settings and events from page to page, with a photo and cultural points section at the end, offering helpful visual input as well as aural and print. The protagonist, a fourteen-year old boy named Marquat, whose parents moved to the UK from Nigeria, begins attending a new school. Intercultural and racial issues, assumptions and some misunderstandings come into play, and the characters in the story eventually work through to a satisfying resolution.

The Preschool Education department students were asked to listen to the story repeatedly to support their development of smoother reading. To promote active visualization of the story and support recall of the storyline (Tomlinson, 1996; Yumitani, 2015), they were encouraged to draw additional pictures and make notes in the wide margins of their books. Also, to scaffold actively helping each other through the discussions, the student members were asked to prepare for rotating discussion roles in their upcoming reading circle meetings, as adapted from Shelton-Strong (2012) and simplified in this study to three roles: a discussion leader/overall plot summarizer, a vocabulary checker, and a culture or interesting points-focus person (see Isozaki, 2016 for a bilingual version of the guidance handout).

At the second university setting, in reading courses for majors in International Communications, students were asked to read an ungraded memoir: *Tuesdays with Morrie*, by Mitch Albom. The memoir recounts the months during which a successful sportswriter, Mitch Albom, visited his former university professor weekly for a day of discussion on topics which Morrie, the professor, had concluded were the most important in life.

Student readers in previous semesters had commented that they found the memoir meaningful and thought-provoking. A movie adaptation from the book was available and was shown with English captioning as a preview for both courses' members prior to reading, to orient the students to the overall context, characters, situation and storyline. Compared to most graded reader materials, the ongoing effort to follow and complete this memoir would be substantial,

and some research suggests that a film preview to extended authentic reading projects, especially in EFL contexts, can be helpful for subsequent reading (Chen, 2012; Nishino, 2007). The students were also encouraged to listen to the audiobook repeatedly, to support their smoother reading of the memoir.

At both universities the courses' members were introduced to and set up in reading circles, (informally termed "book clubs" with the students to convey the intended small size and relaxed atmosphere) as sessions distinct from ordinary full-class activities. To stimulate engagement with the books and overcome possible feelings of intimidation, the project was initially integrated into class time: "onboarding" by giving some brief, supported reading opportunities in class to help promote progress in the primarily outside-class reading and listening (Van Amelsvoort, 2017, p. 100). Book club discussion meetings were then held approximately biweekly within class throughout the semester (please see Van Amelsvoort 2016, 2017 for detailed research on these considerations and Chang & Renandya, 2017, p. 47 regarding proactive inclusion of such activities in university settings).

The pattern for book club sessions was to rearrange class members into small groups of four or five, spread around the classroom for fifteen or twenty-minute discussions, with their books and notes at hand, so that the students could speak comfortably with each other and the instructor could circulate and help as needed. The activities varied slightly by course, depending on students' proficiency and preferences. Opinion exchanges, confirmation of the storyline, vocabulary questions, and discussion of sometimes contrasting culture points were the main activities in both settings, with the bulk of the discussions between students. Questions the learners could not resolve alone were addressed to the instructor, and when resolved were communicated back through the groups. In both settings, the books were divided flexibly, recognizing other time demands on the students, but with scheduling to arrange for everyone to complete the stories within the last weeks of the semester.

Data Collection

On completion of the reading-listening projects, members of the four courses were asked to answer anonymous questionnaires on their experiences and opinions about the projects, which had been prepared bilingually. The instructor stressed that responses and comments would be free of any influence on their grades. Questionnaire items had been piloted and revised over several years, both for the questions and the closest match-ups in the bilingual version, checked by native speaker Japanese teachers of English for language accuracy. Students were asked to answer every question, because their choices would constitute something like a numerical vote, and those results would guide the design of future projects. The surveys were adapted into two versions to reflect the slightly different activities carried out by members of the different courses (Appendices A, B; bilingual versions at Isozaki, 2016). Reflecting the iterative nature of instrument design and use, post-survey examination and reflection highlighted some drawbacks, discussed below in the limitations section.

RESULTS

Graded Reading-and-Listening and Reading Circles with Roles

Preschool Education first-year students.

Survey results yielded descriptive data. In the Preschool Education department, in which the students read and listened to *A Faraway World* (Banfi, 2010), the first-year students were in a class of twenty-eight members (twenty-seven surveys were collected due to one absence).

As the following student comment indicates, the book itself was appreciated:

“This story is fun. Because this story is written about school. My dream is school teacher. So I interested in school story. I can study for this story.”

Regarding book clubs, nineteen (70%) of the first-year students indicated that they felt both the book clubs and discussion roles within them were useful (see Table 1). This was somewhat lower than expected and may have reflected the unfamiliarity of collaborative discussion tasks for these first-year students, after their largely test-oriented and competitive high school years. Replies about discrete skills were more confident: 24 members (89%) indicated that they felt their vocabulary had improved, and 89% felt improvements in their reading skills. Ninety-three percent (25 members) felt their listening had gotten stronger: “I started to want to listen with motivation.” Additional comments written in by students touched on building their visualization of the story, such as:

“I draw picture very interesting and understand. So I remember last week work.”

Others commented on the satisfaction of a challenge surmounted:

“Before reading is a little difficult now reading very well!”

A question included for the instructor’s reflections and planning for future interventions was whether the students would be willing to listen to an English book again in the future. This would indicate perhaps most reliably whether the students felt their experience with the project’s integrating of listening and reading had been positive and whether possibly, potential for autonomously using bimodal strategies in the future had developed. All twenty-seven students answered “yes” to this. Additional comments twelve students wrote helped confirm that both listening and reading had been positive experiences and that they felt they would do more, for example:

“Compared to before doing the project, reading has become easier. This made me not only want to read more, it made me want to listen more. I now feel like reading more English books.” [Translations throughout confirmed with native speakers.]

The class members had been encouraged to listen to the story repeatedly, whether separately or simultaneously with reading. A single student reported listening only once, but the

other twenty-six members wrote that they did listen repeatedly. This, then, resulted in 48% listening through the story from one to four times (thirteen members), 33% listening from five to nine times (nine members), and 19% listening from ten to fifteen times (five members). After the initial introductory demonstration of the activities, listening and reading had been done outside of class and autonomously, so these estimates of students' experience could not be verified by other means; however, these self-reported figures were of some interest in themselves as an indication of what the students considered effective and appropriate, with one student adding, for example, "Yes, it was useful to listen for reading."

After being encouraged to try different combinations of reading and listening during the projects to find their own most comfortable and effective conditions, the students' preferred methods, though anonymous, fit well with the observed membership of this class (see Figure 1.). A large group (44% percent of the class) chose simultaneous listening and reading as "Best," possibly indicating a sense of their need to build automaticity in matching up the spoken and written language. An equally large group (also 44%) chose listening, then reading. This separation may have indicated any of three things: willingness to stretch into less supported conditions; a strategy choice to build memory of the story to connect with when reading the print version later; or, a strategy to manage an individual difference in reading and listening comprehension speeds. These motivations may also have been combined. A small group of six members (22%) chose reading, then listening as their most comfortable condition – these students may have been among those with significantly greater English study or travel experience and reading confidence than their classmates, based on an initial "language learning history" assignment written by the students at the beginning of their course (Murphey, 2013).

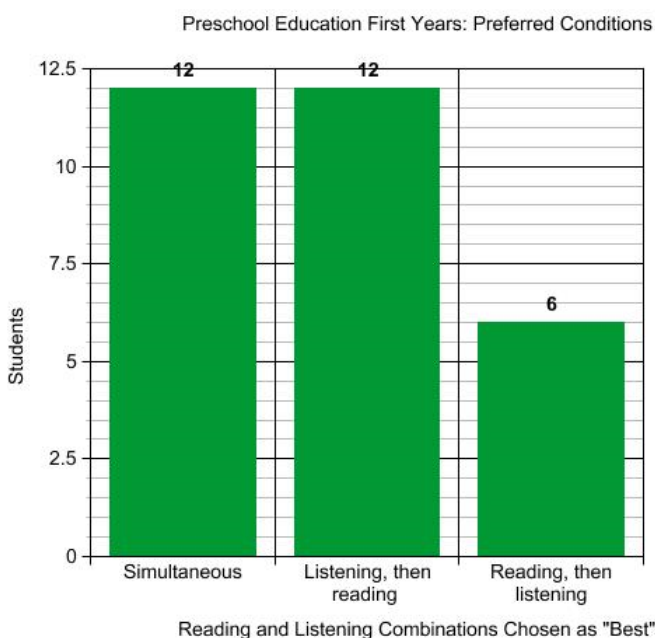


Figure 1. Preschool Education First Year Students' Preferred Combinations

Preschool Education second-year students.

In the same Preschool Education university program, second-year students were in a larger class, with thirty-four members. They read and listened to the same graded reader, *A Faraway World*, because, as above, the story was relevant to future teachers yet unavailable to them without special order; as with the first-year students, none had encountered it before. Similar to those collected from the first-year students, the anonymous final survey results were largely positive, as were additional comments. Book clubs and discussion roles received approval from twenty-eight members (82%) and thirty-one members (91%), respectively. Improvements in vocabulary were felt by twenty-eight members: (“Understanding the words made me happy”), and the same number, also at 82% percent, felt their feelings about listening and reading had both become more positive. Succinct comments from twenty-eight of the thirty-four student members on the questions about changes in their feelings about listening and reading such as: “not good → good” were among the responses, including analogous comments in L1, such as: “I became more positive and active,” “it became fun,” “I started to enjoy it,” and “it became easier.” Another student’s comment, made in Japanese, was: “the change is that now I go to the library myself to borrow English picture books.” A literacy-related goal discussed by Tomlinson (1996) was addressed by a student in L1 as well: “I’ve become able to imagine the story now while listening.”

Five members who wrote positive responses on the other survey questions omitted replies to these changes in feelings questions, or wrote that there was no change because their feelings were already positive. A single member had declined to do the project work and felt s/he did not improve, and therefore the final count of students reporting positive feelings about integrated, autonomous reading and listening was thirty-three of the thirty-four (97%), and thirty-two members (94%) were willing to listen to another English story in the future.

As with the first-year students, the choices made by these second-year students for their integration of reading and listening, though anonymous, fit with the known membership of the class, with a quarter of the class less confident, half the class members having reported positive experiences previously with English, and a final quarter who had accumulated both more experience and confidence by this second year, second semester course. Ten members (29%) chose simultaneous reading and listening, a large group (53%) chose listening and then reading (18 members), and another minority chose reading, then listening: 11 members (32%)². Except for the single non-listener and two members who listened only once, most students reported that they listened repeatedly: twelve twice (35%), fourteen students between five and nine times (41%), and five members (15%) reported listening from ten to thirty or more times to the story, in all.

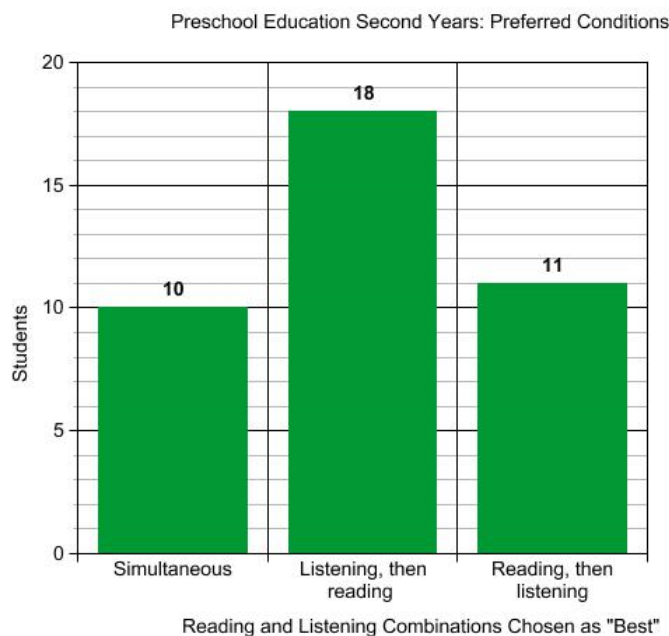


Figure 2. Preschool Education Second Year Students' Preferred Combinations

Memoir Reading-and-Listening, and Free Discussion

At the second university setting, in the first and second year reading courses for majors in International Communications, students watched the film and then were invited to decide together how to structure and proceed with their book club discussions. Both of these courses' members chose unstructured, free discussion rather than a structured format and set discussion roles. The instructor asked these students to accompany their listening and reading with small notebooks of their drawings, comments, new vocabulary, and questions about the story as they proceeded through the chapters outside of class (Yumitani, 2013, 2015). Their notebooks, termed "manga notes" in these courses, referring to the popular Japanese graphic novels, would then serve as springboards for their biweekly discussions in class, and would be useful for reminders on topics they might wish to ask each other or the instructor about (e.g., vocabulary, culture points in the memoir, and references in the story to unfamiliar happenings and trends from the U.S. in the 1970s – 1990s). By drawing characters and scenes in these notebooks, students were also demonstrating how they visualized the story and their responses to the narrative (Yumitani, 2015).

International Communications first-year students.

The first-year course had fifteen students completing the final survey (two were absent from the final meeting). All the students except one with a neutral response reported liking the memoir. All participants felt their vocabulary had improved, that their English listening improved, and that their reading had improved. The book clubs scored well, with 100% approval,

with further comments written in such as: “Yes. It was very interesting to know what my friends felt about the story.” All indicated that they felt a transfer of these improvements to their other English language studies. “I gained confidence because I finished reading book,” was an additional response, and all members wrote that they would be willing to listen to an English book again in the future, some with exclamation points. It should be mentioned that this enthusiasm represented more than ordinary diligence on the part of these first year, second semester university students: This cohort had been assigned from their first semester to the least proficient level in their year. Their completion of this memoir project involved considerable academic motivation and effort on their part – the integrated project was in addition to the syllabus-listed assignments they and the other cohorts of students in their program were completing.

Regarding the introductory audio-visual element in this project and preferred ordering, the majority (eleven students: 73%) preferred the English-captioned film first. Reasons for preferring to start with a film given by this majority included variations on the theme that the movie helped their understanding: “so I can catch the atmosphere first,” and that the movie made the story more accessible while still being motivating for getting “more detail[ed] information” afterwards through the audiobook and reading.

As with the Preschool Education course members, the students had been encouraged to combine their listening and reading simultaneously, or to try alternatives such as listening first and then reading, or reading first and then listening; with repeated listening encouraged in any case. One member did not complete the entire audiobook, and five members (33%) wrote that they had listened once to the memoir. The rest of the class listened between two and five times (6 members: 40%), approximately ten times (two members: 13%) and one (6%) reported more than twenty times listening. The members’ stated preferences for their autonomous ordering of reading and listening activities was consistent, as in the Preschool Education department, with the profile of the class: a small group of stronger readers and the majority of members still working towards comfortable fluency with reading (see Figure 3). Eight members (53%) chose simultaneous reading and listening as an apparently comfortable match. Four members (27%) wrote that they preferred listening, then reading. Four members (27%) indicated that they preferred reading before listening to the audiobook, from surveys which otherwise also indicated they were among the more proficient readers. Stronger readers often report reading rates which outpace audiobook performers’ speaking rates; these readers sometimes prefer reading through a story at their own faster pace and then listening to the performed version separately, after completing their initial read-through. The totals in this class came to more than 100% due to the inclusion of a student’s additional vote, indicating two preferred conditions.

Within the different conditions the students chose, the reasons they wrote for their individual choices showed some shared motivations. Many wrote about wanting to understand or catch the story better, or referred to their chosen method(s) as leading best to grasping the content, vocabulary, pronunciation, or for increasing their reading speeds. Their comments indicated the students chose to integrate conditions in accordance with their own goals and in relation to their personal, present level of skills.

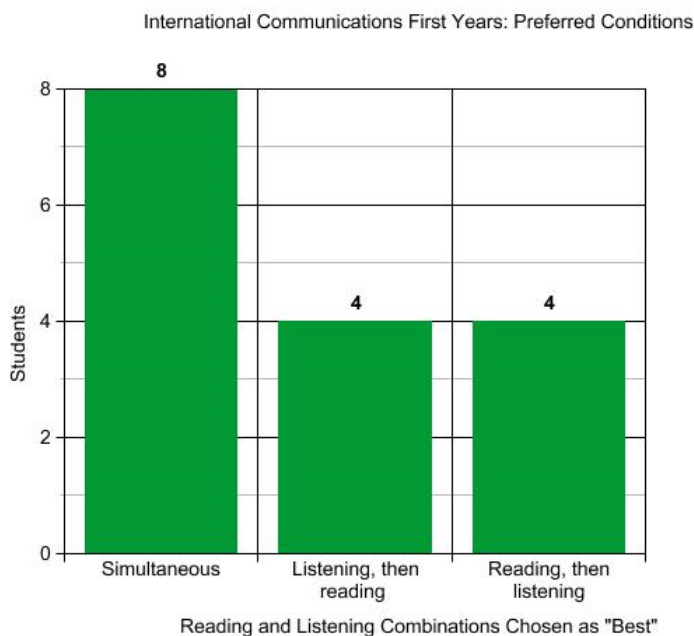


Figure 3. International Communications First Year Students' Preferred Combinations

International Communications second-year students.

In the same International Communications department, the second-year course had 22 members, all of whom completed the final survey. Due to schedule conflicts with other courses taking precedence over streaming, this class had widely mixed levels of English experience, confidence, and motivation. Some class members seemed comfortable with English and with each other, while other members seemed less at ease both linguistically and socially.

The film, however, seemed unanimously liked: “We thought beyond description,” “heart-warming,” “moving,” “deep!” Social discomfort was made evident most clearly in the final survey responses to book clubs, for which approval was a relatively low 64% (14 members). Individually-oriented questions yielded more positive responses: liking the story at 91% (20 members), improvements in vocabulary felt by 86% (19 members) and feelings that listening to English had improved and that the project had helped with other English listening, at 68% (15 members) for both. Responses were sometimes eloquent: “Now I feel it is not like torture, but music,” and even indicated that the book clubs’ social aspect had been found valuable despite the divergent makeup of this class: “It is interesting to listen other people’s opinion by reading books.” Regarding the number of times listening through the audiobook, responses varied widely. One did not listen at all. Ten members listened once (45%), while a further eight members listened between two and four times (36%). One member listened about ten times (5%), and two members (9%) wrote that they did not know, but calculating from their reported weekly listening and reading, both appear to have listened at least five times. Twenty-one members (95%) reported willingness to listen to another book in the future for diverse, positive reasons and motivations:

“Yes, because I could study pronunciation and intonation through listening.”

“YES I wanna read and listen to ‘Hobbit’ and ‘Harry Potter’.”

The students’ choices for integrating their activities for their best personal comfort again were consistent to the observed makeup of the class. While the majority (77%, seventeen members) preferred viewing the film first, evidence of the divergent reading and listening levels and confidence of the class showed up most clearly in the members’ listening and reading choices (Figure 4). A large group (45%) chose to utilize the confidence-and reading automaticity-building condition of simultaneous listening and reading (ten members, including two who chose two conditions rather than one). A small group (14%, three members) tried listening, then reading. Ten members (45%) chose reading followed by listening, potentially indicating more confidence, or faster reading outpacing the audio speed. The single member who had not done the listening (see above) also did not respond to the question about combinations of reading and listening, and wrote briefly in that section of the survey, “I don’t like.”

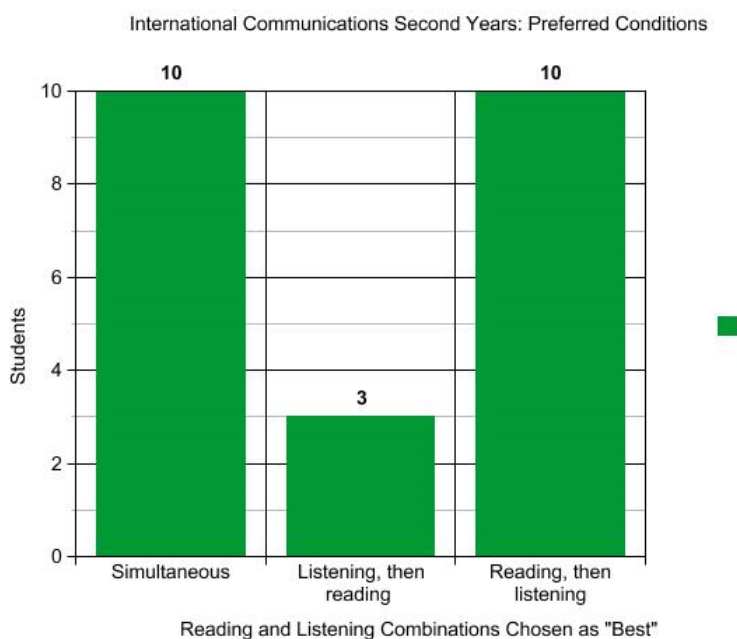


Figure 4. International Communications Second Year Students’ Preferred Combinations

Overall, the project’s influence in helping with other English reading was considered positive by 77% (seventeen members), and when combined with at least tentatively thinking they had improved in general reading skills, 91% (nineteen members). Additional comments included, “I came to like reading” and: “Now I have confidence to read such a long story.”

Table 1. Participants' feelings of improvement, skill gains or approval by category
University Major, Year

	Preschool Ed. 1	Preschool Ed. 2	Int'l Comm. 1	Int'l Comm. 2
Vocabulary change	89%	82%	100%	86%
Feelings re. reading	89%	82%	100%	91%
Feelings re. listening	93%	82%	100%	68%
Transfer other reading	n/a	n/a	100%	71%-91%*
Transfer other listening	n/a	n/a	100%	68%
Feelings re. Book Clubs	70%	82%	100%	64%
Willing to do again	100%	94%	100%	95%

n = 27 Preschool Ed. 1; n = 34 Preschool Ed. 2; n = 15 Int'l Comm. 1; n = 22 Int'l Comm. 2

Note. 71%-91% = certain and tentative self-assessments of improved reading skills

DISCUSSION

The four courses' semester-long projects reported above elicited descriptive data and qualitative feedback, as summarized in Table 1. Overall, the investigation's research questions: Would the students find an integrated project helpful? Would they try bimodal methods again? and, Were any patterns in their preferences discernable? could all be answered positively for the four courses. More investigation is needed; specific points are discussed below and in the limitations section.

Vocabulary

The high levels of positive survey responses (see Table 1.) to the question, "at the end of this project do you feel you understand more vocabulary?" from all four courses and in students' further comments seem to indicate that providing a story and natural context for new vocabulary, with audio, peer and instructor support as in these projects can lead to learners' self-awareness of vocabulary gains. This feedback concurs with empirical findings elsewhere, particularly Webb and Chang (2012; 2015). In their (2012) research, students who read and listened gained significantly in vocabulary compared to students who read texts silently. Webb and Chang (2015) further found that repeated reading and listening to stories was more effective for vocabulary learning in both post-tests and delayed post-tests, compared to typical textbook study done by a control group. One factor noted by the researchers was that with the shared stories their participants read and listened to, "there was greater potential for class discussion about the content" (p. 679). Other factors the authors noted were that students could use dictionaries and had learning journals (p. 681), potentially helping reinforce and consolidate their learning, and paralleled in the present study's method.

Students' additional written comments regarding vocabulary in the present study's results seem to indicate motivating and effective roles for a narrative providing context: a second-year Preschool Education major wrote "it made me happy when I understood the words," and a second-year International Communications major answered: "Yes, because I can easily understand new word with story." Other students wrote:

"Yes. I can imagine the words meaning."

"Yes, because I can understand unknown words from other words or sentences."

"Yes, because the same words came up and were repeated in Morrie's book."

Student observations such as these may be emphasizing the provision of context and natural recycling of terms and phrases which occur in narrative literature and suggest that for vocabulary development, bimodal and integrated approaches may offer options to explore further.

Feelings about Reading

The survey question was: "From this project, what kind of changes have you noticed in your feelings about reading in English?" As Table 1 shows, the majority of the four classes' students felt that their projects eased their experiences of reading English. Many commented further, similarly to the first-year International Communications student who wrote: "I gained confidence because I finished reading book."

Feelings about Listening

The survey question was: "From this project, what kind of changes have you noticed in your feelings about listening in English?" As can also be seen in Table 1, the majority of the four classes' members felt that their projects eased their experiences of listening to English, again with further comments. The survey questions regarding changes becoming noticeable in other English-using contexts were irrelevant to the Preschool Education students, who generally did not experience any contact with English except through the course discussed in this paper. The International Communications students, however, did have other courses and contact with English in most cases, and the question of possible transfer to other contexts was answered positively by a majority, though the variance was wide. Deeper investigation into factors involved, including the complex interactions of identity, skills, motivation, and confidence (Norton, 2013; Sampson, 2015) as well as the variance in degrees of engagement may pose useful questions for future research.

Reading Circle “Book Clubs”

The survey question was: “Were the book club meetings useful?” As Table 1 shows, the majority of the four classes’ members approved; including social elements in their reading projects seems to have added enjoyment for these courses’ members. Attempting to measure effects of book club activities on discrete skills was outside the scope of the present project, but reducing foreign language learning stress, anxiety, and avoidance of reading, and offering opportunities for students to learn from each other were among the goals for the projects.

Another type of relationship, which the survey did not attempt to explore beyond the question of whether students liked their stories, surfaced in some course members’ comments. From students’ writing, it seems active engagement with a sustained narrative, even with a level of challenge, can also enable a relationship for these readers with the story and main characters, with its own meaning and relevance:

“This story is very interesting. Because I can understand this story. And Ma[r]quat is cool boy. I love Ma[r]quat.”

LIMITATIONS

Given the strong empirical, quantitative evidence for benefits of bimodal input already in the published literature, these classroom studies did not attempt replication but rather to qualitatively explore autonomous integrations of bimodal input and reading circles. The primary limitations of this study, therefore, were the absence of objective testing assessments for skill levels with which the students began and finished the projects. Reading speed measurements, for example, may have provided more empirical information. Achievement tests or even internationally used norm-referenced exams such as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) (both copyright Educational Testing Service) may also have provided data of reference. Participant numbers were small, limiting generalizability, and the comparative, collaborative approach sought students’ opinions rather than controlled data to apply in wider contexts. Also, the surveys themselves may have been too long, and near-repeat confirmation questions might have been better left off. Though it was not possible to gather data in the present study beyond the self-assessments, feedback, and observations discussed here, these limitations will be addressed in future research.

CONCLUSION

This comparative classroom L2 literacy intervention research was intended to explore whether integrating autonomous, self-regulated audio support and reading circle participation

with L2 reading could improve foreign language literacy experiences and reading fluency for young adult learners. Rather than contrasting results, however, the project results at the two universities suggested that appropriately-leveled reading and listening materials could offer strongly positive experiences for learners of various proficiencies in foreign language reading when given social support, options, and guided autonomy in integrating their reading, listening, and reading circle participation.

Chang and Renandya (2017, p. 48) have discussed the issue of initial invisibility of improvements for students in reading. Students need their accomplishments and increases in skill to somehow be tangible, to keep going. Engaging materials and peer support may have encouraged participants to do *enough* in these projects to make improvements that were noticeable and rated positively by the learners themselves. Survey responses showed what factors learners considered most effective for building their skills and enjoyment of reading, with peer group discussions (reading circles) gaining majority approval and listening to audiobooks before, simultaneously, or after reading credited by learners as helpful in a number of ways. Methods of integration experimented with by the students and found to be their most comfortable combinations for input may correlate with those individual learners' skill and experience levels; if so, further research on these variables may be valuable for designing appropriate L2 literacy interventions in the future. Longer-term studies will be needed, too, to determine if changes like those found by learners in these projects can be objectively measurable and satisfactorily sustainable. Students' comments about being willing to do more in the future suggest some grounds for tentative optimism. Though the sample sizes were small, these high percentages of positive assessments by the participants regarding changes they observed in their own skills and feelings suggest that bimodal listening and reading can be considered helpful, in concurrence with empirical findings elsewhere, and that some of the options explored by students in their reading-listening and reading circle projects may merit further study and investigation.

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NOTES

1. This article was developed from a research proposal, published in April 2016, *Accents Asia*.
2. The member counts and percentage totals exceed one hundred percent because five students reported trying and liking more than one method.

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APPENDIX A: (Reprinted here are the English versions, and for the full bilingual questionnaires please see Isozaki, 2016, available online).

Book and audio book listening survey

Please answer every question carefully. This survey has no relation to your grades. Please do not write your name: this is an anonymous survey. I will not be using your names or identities in any way. Please also feel free to write on the back!

1. How did you listen to the audiobook – by computer, CD player, or music player?
2. Where did you listen, for example in the train, while walking...?

How did you do listening, and reading?

3. Did you try listening and reading at the same time?
4. Did you try listening, then reading later?
5. Did you try reading, then listening later?
6. Of the above, which way was best for you?
7. **Every week**, how many hours did you listen to the story?
8. In the project, how many times in total did you **read** your entire book through?
9. In the project, how many times in total did you **listen** to your entire book through?
10. At the end of this project do you feel you can catch the story better, when just listening?
11. At the end of this project do you feel you understand more vocabulary? Why?
12. Has the project helped with any of your other English **listening**?
13. Has the project helped with any of your other English **reading**?
14. Were the book club meetings useful?
15. Were the discussion roles useful?
16. Did you **like** the story we read and listened to?
17. From this project, what kind of changes have you noticed in your **feelings** about *listening* in English?
18. From this project, what kind of changes have you noticed in your **feelings** about *reading* in English?
19. Do you think you will want to **listen** to another English book in the future?
20. What was the best order for you with book reading and audiobook combining?
 1. Simultaneously
 2. Listening, then reading
 3. Reading, then listening

Why?

Do you have any comments or advice about this project? It will be useful for future students, so please memo here.

Thanks so much for your time, comments and advice!!!

APPENDIX B: Book, Movie and Audiobook listening survey

*Please answer **every question carefully**. This survey has no relation to your grades. Please do not write your name: this is an anonymous survey. I will not be using your names or identities in any way. Please also feel free to write on the back!*

1. How did you listen to the audiobook – by computer, CD player, or music player?
 2. Where did you listen, for example in the train, while walking...?
- How did you do listening, and reading?**
3. Did you try listening and reading at the same time?
 4. Did you try listening, then reading later?
 5. Did you try reading, then listening later?
 6. Of the above, which way was best for you?
 7. **Every week**, how many hours did you listen to the story?
 8. In the project, how many times in total did you **read** your entire book through?
 9. In the project, how many times in total did you **listen** to your entire book through?
 10. At the end of this project do you feel you can catch the story better, when just listening?
 11. At the end of this project do you feel you understand more vocabulary? Why?
 12. Has the project helped with any of your other English **listening**?
 13. Has the project helped with any of your other English **reading**?
 14. Were the book club meetings useful?
 15. Did you **like** the story we read and listened to?
 16. From this project, what kind of changes have you noticed in your **feelings** about *listening* in English?
 17. From this project, what kind of changes have you noticed in your **feelings** about *reading* in English?
 18. Do you think you will want to **listen** to another English book in the future?
 19. What was the best order for you with book reading and audiobook combining?
 1. Simultaneously
 2. Listening, then reading
 3. Reading, then listening

Why?
 20. Do you prefer to see the movie before listening and reading to the book, or after, or in alternating order?

1. Movie first, then listening and reading after
2. Book listening and reading first, and movie at the end
3. Alternating

Why?

Do you have any comments or advice about this project? It will be useful for future students, so please memo here.

Thanks so much for your time, comments and advice!!!