

Chapter 8

An Exploratory Study of the Effects of Extended Online Thematic Listening Tasks on the Development of Listening Comprehension

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the effects of employing extended online thematic listening tasks on the development of listening comprehension in an English course focusing on reading and writing skill development. To accomplish this aim, extended online thematic listening tasks were designed and implemented in English as a Foreign-Language (EFL) college level General English course. Pre- and post-tests were conducted to examine students' gains in overall listening proficiency. Moreover, students' mid-term and final exams were compared in order to track student progress. Data on student perceptions of online thematic tasks was also collected and analyzed. Findings suggest that extended online thematic listening tasks may constitute a dynamic forum which fosters significant gains in listening comprehension, test performance, and development of learning strategies. In addition, the findings reveal that students' initial enthusiasm toward extended online listening tasks faded and the efforts that they put into the tasks gradually decreased as the semester progressed. Therefore, time availability and management become an important pedagogical issue in e-learning.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-1855-8.ch008

INTRODUCTION

Listening comprehension plays a key role in second/foreign language learning and teaching (Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Brown, 1986, 1989; Grabelatos, 1995) and the benefits of integrating technology into listening instruction is a research area that calls for more attention (Joiner, 1997). According to Stockwell's (2007) meta-analyses of technology selection for teaching language skills in previous CALL studies, compared to other language skills (e.g., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, reading and writing), significantly fewer studies have been conducted to examine the use of technology or online activities in the teaching of listening skills. In other words, even though online learning has been well-received and studied widely, listening has not yet been the focus of many studies.

Increased accessibility and emerging technologies provide more possibilities and potential for listening instruction and learning (Goodwin-Jones, 2007; Tschirner, 2001). The web has become an appealing medium for learning and teaching due to its multimedia capabilities and interactive features (Li & Hart, 1996). Research findings indicate that pictorial support and written annotation together better facilitate L2 listeners in vocabulary acquisition and recalling aural text than pictorial annotation or written annotation in and of themselves (Jones & Plass, 2002).

Since fast delivery rates tend to be one of the greatest obstacles that impede L2 comprehension (Robin, 2007), online listening materials have several advantages that can flatten the learning curve for language learners. First, online listening materials provide immediate feedback (Hoven, 1999). Second, learners can have exposure to the same topic from multiple perspectives and with different emphases (Rost, 1990; Vandergrift, 2007). Third, learners can practice listening skills at their own pace using technology that features user control over script delivery and speech speed. The technology would help facilitate individual control

over one's own learning (Robin, 2007; Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). Moreover, the reiterative nature of the online texts facilitates repeated exposure to the learning content (Verdugo & Belmonte, 2007). In addition, the glossing aids, captioning, and scripts can benefit decoding, comprehension, and interpretation of the aural texts in the listening process (Robin, 2007). As in electronic media, "listening has become a semi-recursive activity, less dependent on transient memory, inching its way closer to reading, which is fully recursive" (Robin, 2007, p. 110).

Studies have shown that the Computer-assisted Language Learning (CALL) facilitates learner autonomy and responsibility (Absalom & Pais Marden, 2004; Pais Marden & Absalom, 2004; Stockwell, 2003). A CALL environment enables learning to take place without time and space constraints so learners can gain more control of their own learning (Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 2007). For example, by using computer technology as a language learning medium, students can evaluate their own learning outcome, identify the sources of their difficulties, and develop effective learning strategies (Sheerin, 1997; Sturdridge, 1997). Students themselves also perceive computer technology, or specifically, the World Wide Web (WWW), as a context that fosters learner autonomy and can contribute to their language learning (Figura & Jarvis, 2007, Liaw, Huang, & Chen, 2007).

Researchers, however, caution that autonomous learning does not happen in a vacuum nor does it necessarily lead to effective language learning outcomes. Little (1994, p. 435) notes that "learner autonomy is the product of interdependence rather than independence" and the scaffolding provided in instruction is interwoven with learner autonomy. In other words, teachers' appropriate guidance and/or intervention is thus desirable for computer-assisted autonomous language learning to bring about positive and lasting effects (Lu, 2010).

Most studies on the application of technology for language instruction focus on self-designed

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