

Five Online Resources for Extensive Listening in the Japanese EFL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

To promote listening fluency and autonomous language learning, lower-intermediate Japanese students were asked to self-select and listen to six listening texts online for homework each week. After each listening, students completed a short listening log to summarise what they listened to and reflect on their listening experience. This paper will introduce the five websites most regularly used by students during the 15-week course. The author hopes that this paper's theoretical discussion and selection of websites will assist EFL teachers in discerning which online resources would be more appropriate for implementing extensive listening components in their own EFL courses.

INTRODUCTION

For students studying in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context, such as Japan, there are few opportunities to use English outside of the classroom. Advances in internet technology have, however, brought the English world much closer to them. Contemporary English learners can easily search for simplified English media that is interesting and level-appropriate, and they can communicate with other English users on a variety of social networking platforms. In this paper, the author reports on students engaging in online Extensive Listening (hereafter EL) - students independently listening to large quantities of self-selected audiovisual texts at or slightly below their linguistic level. After describing some core features of EL and the EL log component, five websites suitable for beginner and lower-intermediate level learners' EL will be introduced.

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REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Extensive Listening

For this researcher and teacher, a definition of EL is informed by many of the principles of extensive reading. As stated in the introduction, EL involves students listening to large quantities of self-selected texts at or slightly below their linguistic level. With this definition, three core components are highlighted: (1) self-selection of listening texts, which according to Lynch (2009) encourages student motivation to practice and continue practicing in their own time (2) listening in large quantities. Apart from spending long periods of time listening, researchers such as Gilliland (2015) advocate exposing learners to different types of discourse (e.g., dialogic speech, accents, cultures), and (3) the level of the text needs to be at or below students' reading level. In fact, the level of text deserves special attention when the focus is listening. For many EFL learners listening is exponentially harder than reading because listening training was most likely preceded by reading and writing instruction. A student's aural vocabulary knowledge also has a significant effect on listening comprehension. Waring (2010) noted that students can only start to recognise specific linguistic features such as collocations and nuances of grammar and pronunciation when almost all of the words in the text are understood. Moreover, while reading, one can go back and re-read a section to follow up on an unknown word or phrase. Reviewing a text cannot be done as easily while listening as students have to fiddle with a media player to find the specific section in question or forfeit understanding parts of a listening text to focus on a specific listening problem. Listening is also made harder by speech speeds (Renandya & Farrell, 2011), accents, and the type of speech (e.g., a conversation will be very different from a radio news broadcast). These potential challenges faced by EFL learners led the author to side with other educators (e.g., Gilliland, 2015; Waring, 2010) in recommending students to listen to texts easier than their reading level (e.g., I-1 or I-2).

Studies in EL

While it is reported that the effects of EL on language learning are under-researched, most of the published research report on its positive influence. Chang and Millet (2016) investigated the effects on a treatment group of 76 Taiwanese EFL students who read-while-listening to a graded reader book in class, then listened and answered comprehension questions about the same book for homework. The researchers found that students who were able to complete over 10 books during the treatment were able to achieve the largest increases in listening fluency and TOEIC test scores. The researchers observed that the more students practiced, the better they became, and that the post-listening activities seemed to promote students' listening competence. Another important observation from this study was that low-level listeners took longer to listen effectively. As a result, the authors recommended that lower-level speakers spend extended periods of time working at the lowest level of listening.

Gilliland (2015) reported on her intermediate and advanced English as a second language (ESL) students' perceptions of EL logs. Surveys of students who used listening logs for several semesters revealed that the EL log experience had encouraged students to seek out new genres of listening content and it exposed them to elements of American culture that they were unfamiliar with. Students also reported improvements in their listening and critical thinking skills.

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Chen (2016) reported on her Taiwanese EFL students maintaining an EL diary. Students perceived the EL diary component positively and cited the following benefits: its effect on future study planning; the gaining of new knowledge; improvement in listening skills; and an increase in confidence. In her conclusion, Chen noted that for the seeds of successful independent learning to grow, teachers need to carefully monitor students' progress as well as dedicate time to training students to navigate the myriad of online listening resources.

The positive reports observed in these studies along with the researcher's interest in training students to become more autonomous language learners led to this EL pilot study.

METHOD

Participants

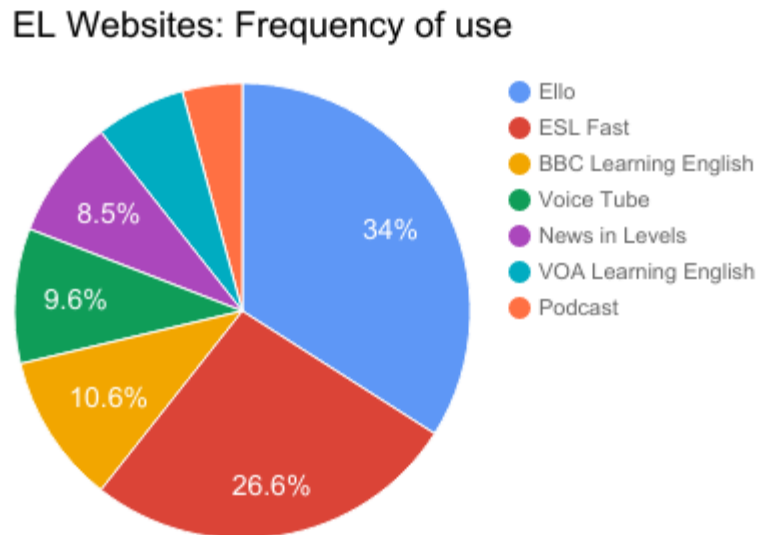
A class of 20 Japanese university EFL students (CEFR levels A2 & B1) was asked to individually select audio or videotexts online and complete a short post-listening questionnaire created in Google Forms. Students were encouraged to complete a minimum of six logs per-week for homework over a 15-week semester. At the end of the course, student's log data was reviewed to establish student's homework grade, which amounted to 10% of their overall grade for the class.

Extensive Listening Logs

The post-listening questionnaire was an adaptation of Chen's (2016) listening diaries and Gilliland's (2015) listening logs. The questionnaire (see Appendix 1) included nine questions relating to students' listening experience. Responses were automatically fed into an online spreadsheet (Google Sheets), which could be viewed by all students and the teacher. The teacher's motivation for sharing access to log results with the class were based on (a) a desire to create a platform for sharing EL resources, and (b) wanting to promote greater student accountability as students could easily identify who was actively completing their homework assignments or not.

The 595 logs completed by students over the duration of the semester-long course was analysed to identify which websites were the most visited (see Figure 1 below).

FIGURE 1
Most popular websites for EL



DISCUSSION

Five free online extensive listening resources for EFL students

In the following section, the five most selected websites by this group of students will be described.

ELLLO <www.ello.org>

Created by Todd Beuckens in Japan, English Language Learning Online (ELLLO) offers over 1000 listening texts. The website catalogues listening texts at: beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. The simple design and useful top navigation bar makes it easy to find texts at an appropriate level. One of the most attractive points for this site is that students can listen to dialogic speech and a wide variety of accents. Along with transcripts, each listening text has a series of follow-up questions and vocabulary related activities which listeners can use to deepen engagement and evaluate their comprehension.

ESL Fast <www.eslfast.com>

This American website hosts thousands of listening texts. Similar to ELLLO, it has a large number of basic-level listening texts and students can choose between dialogic and monologic texts. Two caveats for this site are its confusing navigation, and it features North American English predominantly.

BBC Learning English <<http://www.bbc.co.uk/learningenglish/english/>>

BBC Learning English was not designed specifically for EL, rather, it is a site for English learners and the teaching of English. The site is, however, very attractive for students and they can take a variety of short courses which include interesting video content. It is important to note that this site focuses on British English and people living in the United Kingdom, so it may not appeal to some learners. Another drawback is that the listening focused courses start at the lower intermediate level, and therefore, the content may be too difficult for beginner or early-intermediate students.

VoiceTube <www.voicetube.com>

This Taiwanese English learning website presents online video watching as the best way to immerse oneself in English. The site offers a wide selection of videos graded at the levels: Basic (TOEIC 250-545), Intermediate (TOEIC 550-780), and Advanced (TOEIC 780-990). After selecting their level, students can choose the genre of film they would like to watch. Two clear strengths of this website are that students can opt to slow down the speed of the video and there is an auto-prompt function that runs through the transcript while one is listening (displayed in Figure 2 below).

FIGURE 2
Screenshot illustrating a Video in VoiceTube and the auto-prompting (flowing highlighting) of the transcript



News in Levels <www.newsinlevels.com/>

As the name suggests, this website presents the news across three levels: one (1000 vocabulary level), two (2000 vocabulary level) and three (3000 vocabulary level). A useful feature of this site is that a news story is presented in each of the three levels, so students can experiment with listening to higher levels. News stories come from all over the world and it is an excellent resource for beginner or lower-level listeners. The site also has a mobile application (iOS and Android), which makes it a useful resource for learners on the go.

CONCLUSION

For EFL teachers, online EL represents an exciting opportunity to develop students' listening fluency and train students to become independent English learners. Nevertheless, the ever-growing volumes of authentic English audio and videos online necessitate teachers and students exercising prudence in exploiting these resources for EL. Although the five websites introduced in this paper are only a tiny fraction of the English listening material available online, they represent an excellent base for EFL teachers to build an EL component. More importantly, the websites featured in this paper are appropriate for beginner and lower-intermediate students. Table 1 below summarises some of the key features of each site. Teachers should also consider the extensive lists of online EL resources presented by Gilliland (2015), Waring (2010), Saunders (2017) and Vo (2013).

TABLE 1
Comparative table for EL websites

Website	Basic level texts	Monologic speech	Dialogic speech	Variety of accents	Post listening quizzes	Transcripts
ELLLO www.ello.org	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
ESL Fast www.eslfast.com	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
BBC Learning English www.bbc.co.uk/learning/english/		✓	✓		✓	✓
Voice Tube www.voicetube.com		✓	✓	✓		✓
News In Levels www.newsinlevels.com	✓	✓		✓		✓

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APPENDIX A

Extensive Listening Log as Google Form

Available from <https://goo.gl/lonXLR>

Extensive Listening Log

A log of all extensive listening tasks completed in Semester 2, 2016

* Required

1. What is your name? *

Mark only one oval.

- Student name A
- Student name B
- Student name C

2. Which class' homework was this for? *

Mark only one oval.

- 10/5
- 10/10
- 10/12
- 10/17
- 10/19
- 10/24
- 10/26
- 10/31
- 11/2
- 11/7
- 11/9
- 11/14
- 11/16
- 11/21
- 11/23
- 11/28
- 11/30
- 12/5
- 12/7
- 12/12
- 12/14
- 12/19
- 12/21
- 1/11
- 1/16
- 1/18
- 1/23
- 1/25

Listening Review

3. Which website did you use? *

Mark only one oval.

- Drama episode
- BBC Learning English
- BBC news
- VOA News
- TED Talks
- VoiceTube
- Ello
- ER Central
- YouTube
- Vimeo
- Podcast
- ESL FAST
- News in Levels
- Other: _____

4. What was the Title? *

5. What was the URL? *

6. How long was the listening? (e.g., 12:17) *

7. How many times did you listen/watch? *

Mark only one oval.

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- More than 5?

8. Was the listening monologic or dialogic? *

Mark only one oval.

- Monlogic
- Dialogic

3/24/2017

Extensive Listening Log

9. Did you use English subtitles?

Mark only one oval.

- No
 Yes

10. What listening problems did you face? *

Check all that apply.

- Unknown vocabulary
 Couldn't focus on the next part because you were thinking about the previous section/words/concepts
 Couldn't chunk streams of speech
 Quickly forgot what was heard
 Could not understand the speaker(s) accent
 Could understand the words, BUT NOT the message/idea
 Could not understand the end of the story because you could not understand the introduction
 The speech was too fast
 Technological problems (e.g., video stopped, smartphone died, file problems)
 Other: _____

11. Write a reflection for the listening: Why did you choose this file? How was the content? How was your listening performance? What will you do differently next time? *
