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Collaborative Listening Study in Twenty Minutes

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This paper describes a listening project that is an outcome of ongoing research addressing the need to prepare students for self-directed study beyond the classroom. Included are details of a weekly twenty-minute collaborative listening study session conducted at lunchtime at the authors' college language lab over one academic year. Data relating to changes in both learner attitudes to listening and listening ability were gathered through teacher observation, interviews, surveys, and testing, and were subsequently analyzed. Insights are presented

stemming from the research and beliefs about effective collaboration, towards self-direction, and its value in listening learning.

本稿はリスニング能力向上プロジェクトの成果について論じる。研究課題として、学生達がクラス授業では養成されない自主学習の取り組み方の必要性を常に考察してきた。プロジェクトの一環として、1年間週1回昼休み20分間共同英語リスニング学習をL.L.教室で試行してきた。リスニング学習者の学習意欲姿勢の変化、教師の観察、面談、調査、事前／事後テストを実施し、リスニング能力に関するデータを集め、分析をした。自主学習による共同の有効性と、リスニング学習の重要性の研究と信条から生じる洞察力を提示する。

Background research

At the authors' institution, a self-directed listening learning program was established with the following goals and predicted outcomes: Students would 1) further their listening skills and 2) develop awareness and know-how for independent study; and teachers would come to a better understanding of 1) the nature of independent study and 2) the roles of learners and teachers in self-directed learning (Edwards & Aoki, 1999). The authors believed that students would be able to carry out sustained and effective self-directed study if learning know-how and affective factors were duly considered and efforts were taken to foster students' understanding of what, why, and how they learn, toward the acceptance of responsibility for their own learning (e.g. Holec, 1981; Little & Dam, 1998).

Subsequent research results (Edwards & Aoki, 2000) indicate that students' success with self-directed listening study is

dependent not on their language ability, as we had assumed, but on affect and learning know-how. Clear distinctions exist between students able to make sustained and effective efforts and those unable to do so. It was observed that successful learners 1) are satisfied with learning they control themselves, 2) make clear and reachable goals, 3) choose materials at their own level, 4) understand how to use texts and do practices, 5) recognize progress, and 6) talk about their learning. Unsuccessful learners 1) are discouraged when they do not understand, 2) keep few or no records of their learning, 3) can not find study time, or 4) have difficulty arranging their schedules to study, 5) do not recognize progress, and 6) hesitate to seek help.

Purpose

Based on these results, a more collaborative style weekly listening learning session was begun in an attempt to nurture learners to be more successful. This study investigates the effect of this type of weekly listening learning session on students' listening learning skills and listening proficiency.

Method

Subjects

The experimental group was composed of ten first-year English major volunteers. They were at a high-beginner level, and ranked in the low or mid-range within the English department according to the freshman placement test results. The control group consisted of 112 first-year English majors who represented all three ability levels, high to low, according to the same department wide placement test.

Instrumentation

Pretesting and posttesting were carried out at the beginning and end of the academic year using an in-house listening test with fifty problems of five types (Edwards & Aoki, 1999). Results were compiled and descriptive statistics were generated. Regrettably, low sample numbers in the experimental group precluded the use of statistical tests that would establish significance levels in the differences between the means of the groups allowing reliable generalizations to be made.

Qualitative data were gathered on a weekly basis through observation and student comments during the weekly listening session detailed in the next section of this paper. Intermittent discussions, interviews, and a final survey were also conducted.

Twenty-Minute Listening Session

The weekly twenty-minute listening session was created as a laboratory for learning listening in a cooperative and supportive atmosphere which would allow for the following key issues to be addressed: goal setting and clarifying, using peers as a resource, planning and time management, sustaining efforts, maintaining confidence, and balancing independent study with class work. In this context, the role of teacher was: 1) to provide a listening learning situation with adequate teacher support; 2) to provide an easily accessible practice situation; 3) to provide students opportunities to speak (in response to students' self-reported needs for learning listening); 4) to create a supportive community of peers so students could feel more confident and feel a sense of worth and accomplishment for their efforts; and 5) since it was outside of the curriculum and ungraded, to allow students to reflect on and evaluate their own listening learning.

The sort of collaborative approach followed was chosen over a totally self-directed one, because it had become clear that for these students a do-it-yourself approach would eventually be the right one, but not at the initial stages in their development as self-directed learners (Kohonen 1992).

Materials

It was found that the combination of text and video worked best to give a context for meaning. In order to maximize the listening focus and avoid dependency on the teachers from the start, the level had to be below the students' threshold of understanding. Materials with situational conversations and/or familiar topics directly pertinent to student goals were deemed essential. Specifically, the topics focused on travel and daily life abroad. The text design was rather standard and included exercises that progressed from listening for gist towards more specific information. (See list of materials at the conclusion of this paper)

Timing

Each session was held for twenty minutes during the fifty-minute lunchtime once a week. It began promptly at five minutes after the start of lunch, giving students just enough time to reach the language lab. It ended with enough time left (twenty-five minutes) for the students to eat and get to their next class. The day was carefully chosen to avoid overloading an already full schedule for both students and teachers.

Communication

Students and teachers communicated about schedule changes and other procedural matters through a bulletin board next to the entrance to the lab. Students were advised to check it at least once a week. Other important opportunities for communication were group discussions held during the lunchtime sessions especially before and after school holidays when attention to study tended to wane. Students were asked to discuss goals and other topics, for example how they planned to study over the holidays and ways they had found useful when doing out-of-school listening study activities. To ensure ongoing support, the teachers made themselves available to the students in their offices, with office hours clearly posted.

Session procedures

Each session began promptly at 12:15. Students logged into the CALL system and received the printout of the one-page lesson. They viewed the lesson's video, responded to four or five comprehension questions, and got immediate feedback on their answers. Next was pair practice with headsets on, and then from their seats was a pair presentation so that everyone could hear. Both teachers monitored the students' output, especially pronunciation. At the same time, the students were able to monitor each other. Following this was a three-minute section in which the native-speaker (NS) teacher outlined one or two language usage or pronunciation points using the white board. Then the students did repair work on their pronunciation consulting each other and the NS teacher and concluded with a pair performance in the front of the room, the NS teacher pairing up with a student when there was an odd number. The non-NS (NNS) teacher stayed at the console until the final role-play at

which time she set up the props and directed the students. The session ended promptly at 12:35 and the students were free to go or remain and chat about the session.

As described, the weekly sessions were kept simple and straightforward, yet it was of great concern that they remained engaging for the students. Each meeting had moments of spontaneity and uniqueness, for example when the students hammed it up doing the role plays or when the NS teacher focused on problem points. Examples included discussing language in the text that seemed un-natural or inappropriate, or the NS teacher anticipating pronunciation points that may need attention, but monitoring first to confirm that the assumption was correct. When the lesson had a number of unfamiliar words or idioms, the NNS teacher provided a Japanese translation in order to eliminate the distraction caused by not knowing the meaning. The approach was adapted over time in response to student suggestions and teacher reflection.

Results

Tests

Briefly, overall listening test results indicate slight differences between the experimental and control groups, with less than one point separating the means of both groups on the posttest. The control group means are higher on both tests, but the average gain score is lower by two points. Most noticeable is the relatively narrow range in values for mean scores and gain scores for the experimental group, indicating a somewhat consistent performance within the group. However, as noted above, the small sampling of students in the experimental group did not allow for statistical analysis to find a significant difference between groups to provide numerical evidence of the positive effects of the weekly study sessions.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics: pretest/posttest results of experimental and control groups

Group	n	test	mean	SD	mode	median	mean range	gain score mean	gain score range
Experimental	10	pre	61.80	5.69	62	62	70/54	5.40	14/-2
		post	67.20	7.13	76	69	76/56		
Control	112	pre	59.43	12.35	66	60	80/28	7.39	44/-22
		post	66.84	11.31	66	67	84/44		

It is not clear from the interpretation of test results in terms of listening skill improvement that participation in the weekly study session gives students an advantage. The students in this study tended to be in the middle ranks in the English department, which may suggest that collaborative study such as this appeals to middle-level students who seem to recognize their need for further skill development and possess the will to improve, but do not yet know how to achieve their goals for learning English.

Teacher observations of the weekly study sessions

Attitudes towards the listening study sessions were generally positive, reflected by the students in various ways: They were punctual, attended regularly, and expressed concern about other members in this regard as well. Participants were attentive and stayed on task, but asked few questions. Nevertheless, they did not appear lost or disengaged from the material. Students showed a better understanding of English pronunciation and noticeably improved their pronunciation from week to week, monitoring and repairing pronunciation themselves and placing stress more accurately. They used each other as pronunciation models, demonstrated by the change in pronunciation as each pair of students took their turn to speak. In so doing, they acknowledged the others' performances and skills. Participants appeared increasingly confident and comfortable speaking in front of the group and this was indicated in their feedback. Over time, students added their own suggestions for how they would like the sessions to be run, for example, in terms of how many times to watch the video and in what order they wanted to do the practices.

Student feedback

During a round-table type feedback session, the students reported that the twenty minutes were spent very effectively and that they did not mind sacrificing lunchtime to participate. There was "no time to get bored;" they stayed engaged the entire time. The content was "enough for the time." They also remarked that they like getting quick feedback on their responses and pronunciation. They found the language useful and practical and the topics pertinent to their interests and goals. They noticed their comprehension level improved over time. They were comfortable with each other in the small group environment and one student remarked, "Everyone is friendly!"

The final survey asked the students three questions: 1) which type of listening learning situation, among those they had experienced during the past academic year, was most effective; 2) which materials the students had found worked best for them in their out-of-school study; and 3) how they would like to continue to study on their own. All six of the students who responded indicated that the weekly study session was most effective for them because: it was more enjoyable than a large class; the small number of students allowed for individualized instruction and advice; it included pair speaking practice; the atmosphere was friendly and not competitive; or the materials contained practical expressions, especially for travel.

Each student had a different response to the question concerning materials, but predictably, they included using a selection of recorded media and human resources. Likewise, student responses to how they wanted to study individually were rather typical, focusing on the necessity of establishing time for study and frequent practice.

Through this feedback, the students expressed that they had improved their listening learning skills and had become positive about themselves as listening learners. They had had little awareness or experience with the broader possibilities regarding study resources at the beginning of the listening study sessions. As a result of their experience in the collaborative listening study sessions over the year, they learned about available resources and decided which listening practice methods suit them individually.

Outcome

Although we had expected that the experimental group would make significant gains on the listening posttest over the short term, this was not the case. However, we do expect that the increasingly positive attitudes of the listening group members towards themselves as listening learners will, in the long term, support more autonomous, self-directed listening study by this group. Indeed, the impact on the students' performance in other classes was observable, although not documented.

The twenty-minute sessions can be considered an intermediate step that fits into the continuum from dependence to independence in learning. The confidence-building value is considerable and may overshadow the actual language skill that students gain. On the topic of self-direction, Michael Rost (2002) writes "self-directed activities, in addition to classroom studies, nearly always lead to faster gains in proficiency and marked increases in self-confidence and motivation." This research lends further support to the discussion on the impact of collaborative learning on the confidence and will of the student towards self-direction.

Conclusion

We have described how the efforts of high-beginner students can be supported to improve their listening skills outside of the classroom through participation in a collaborative listening study group. We have thus presented our insights and beliefs about collaboration as a step towards successful and effective self-direction in listening learning. We started out with the grossly over-simplified notion that listening skill development was a matter of putting in the time and letting it happen, following the adage the more you do it, the better you will be at it. At the same time, we also had oversimplified ideas of independent study as a self-supported lone effort. Among other factors, we have realized the complexity of our subject and encourage other researchers to add to the body of knowledge of listening skill development and collaboration/self-direction in language learning. We have also realized that a general lack of understanding is perhaps at the root of many of the failed institutional or individual efforts at listening skill improvement and self-directed study. We hope our study will serve our colleagues in their research endeavors on this theme.

Note

This article is based on a research report entitled "Towards Self-Directed Listening Learning: Value of Weekly Collaborative Study Sessions" which appeared in *Hokkaido Musashi Women's Junior College Kiyo*, 35, 1-18.

Materials

Textbooks/Videocassettes

- Fuller, D. & Fuller, L. (2001). *Essential Listening 2: Questions and Answers*. Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse.
- Murakawa, H. (2000). *Sounds Right! Sounds Good!* (text and videocassette). Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse.
- Sato, K. (Ed.). (1997). *First Time Abroad* (text and videocassette). Tokyo: Seibido.

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