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Listeners' Choice: Survey and Revision in a College Listening Course

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An extensive survey of 592 college students was undertaken in a curriculum revision project of a theme-based listening course for freshmen and sophomore English majors. The project began with a pilot questionnaire of 7 open-ended questions. These questions were further refined into Likert-scale items on a second questionnaire and distributed to students. The data analysis was triangulated by interviewing 15 randomly chosen students of those who completed the questionnaire,

6 of the 18 instructors in the program, and the 2 course developers. The results indicated the students' goals for language learning, preferences for learning materials and classroom activities. The information helped the course developers create new interactive listening tasks that better activated top-down processing among students. The students' responses also suggested that the course developers select learning materials such as films, popular music, and short news items as these would be of greater interest to students than the materials in the current program. Sample survey items and results are described as well as listening tasks that may be useful in other EFL listening programs.

592人の大学生に対する大規模な調査が英米文学科1年・2年生対象のテーマ中心のリスニングコースのカリキュラム改訂のために実施された。まず、7つの質問で構成されている自由回答の調査用紙が使われ、その後、その結果に基づきリカート・スケールを用いた同じ質問で構成された調査用紙が作成され、学生に配布された。データ分析は15人の任意に選ばれた学生、担当講師18人中の6人、2人のプログラム責任者のインタビューも含み、多角的に行われた、その調査結果により、学生の言語学習の目標、教材や教室でのアクティビティの好みが明らかになった。

The integrated English listening course

The development of a listening course for a language-teaching program should take place after a formal and thorough needs analysis. However, course development seldom proceeds in such an orderly procession. In *The Elements of a Language Curriculum*, Brown (1995) comments that “it’s often the case that needs analysis, the formation of goals and objectives, the articulation of tests, and the delivery of instruction are all going on at the same time” (p. 217).

This was the case in the development of three semester-length listening classes for the freshman and sophomore students in the Integrated English (IE) program of language teaching in the English Department at Aoyama Gakuin University. The IE program is organized into themes and tasks (Brinton, Snow, & Wesche, 1989; Willis, 1996). All three courses share themes such as work, the environment, and cross-cultural communication. Tasks in the program consist of writing an academic essay, and leading a small group discussion. Upon entry into the two-year IE program, students are streamed into three different levels of ability, IE I, II, III, and they progress from level I to level III. At each level, they take a 180-minute IE Core class that combines the skills of speaking, writing, reading, and listening and meets once each week. In addition, they are enrolled in an IE Listening class and an IE Writing class, both given weekly in one 90-minute period each.

In the three IE listening classes, teachers are supplied with course materials comprising a series of 20-minute segments from videotapes, largely nature and travel documentaries. In each 90-minute listening class, students have a course booklet and they complete vocabulary exercises before listening to

a videotape. While listening, they work on multiple-choice questions, followed by discussion questions for a post-listening activity. Additional teacher resources consist of transcripts of the videotapes, and answer keys to the questions. Each of the three levels of the IE listening classes has 11 instructional units and each one relates to themes taken up in the IE Core and IE Writing courses. The students’ grades for the course are based on their attendance and on mid-term and final exams.

Curriculum development of the IE listening course began when the IE Program was introduced in 1993 and that development has continued to the present. From the beginning, the listening course has been a challenge in the IE Program. Due to schedule constraints and limited access to the university listening laboratories, the size of each listening class is relatively large. There are as many as 40 students in a class, compared to an average of 25 students in the two other IE courses. Furthermore, the teachers for the IE Listening course are often recruited from the PhD degree program in the English department and are inexperienced. The instruction in the course has tended to be very teacher-centered with the listening teachers translating colloquial expressions, providing commentary on the materials, and explaining the answers to the questions in each unit. The students’ responses have been largely confined to answering multiple-choice questions. The students seldom work in pairs even to check their work and there is relatively little small group work, even discussion of the post-listening topics. Finally, student assessment in the course has been based upon attendance and student performance on midterm and final tests, so the students are given little incentive to work on improving their listening outside of the class.

Since the beginning of the IE Program, efforts have been made to improve the IE listening course. In an attempt to address the concerns over instruction, there is an annual course orientation and training session. As well, there is ongoing revision and development of the course materials. Much of that revision and development has been undertaken with the help of teaching assistants and the part-time teachers in the program. An internal review of the entire IE program took place at the departmental level in 1998. An external review was arranged in 1999 with Alister Cumming of the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education who observed classes and examined curricular materials (Strong, 1999). In both cases, the weaknesses in the IE Listening course were noted. In 2000, the program coordinators arranged for an assessment of the IE Listening course by a student who had been in the IE program previously, but had graduated from the English Department and was undertaking a research MA at the University of Hawaii.

A needs analysis survey

In order to evaluate the IE Listening course, an extensive needs analysis was developed to ascertain the students' language learning targets and their perceptions of the classes. Rosett (1982) suggests a format using questions about problems, priorities, abilities, attitudes, and ideas for solutions to problems. An additional set of questions was posed to the students about their purposes in studying English. Classroom observations were undertaken as well. Perspectives from their listening teachers and the IE program coordinators were also included in the analysis. The list below outlines the 7 types of questions employed in the questionnaires that were used in this research, and in interviews with program participants.

1. What kinds of things would you like to do in the future using English?
2. What kinds of things would you have difficulty with in listening?
3. What kinds of things would you prefer to listen to in the IE Listening class?
4. What kinds of things can you do using English now?
5. What do you like about and do not like about your IE Listening class?
6. Do you have any complaints or problems in the IE Listening class?
7. Do you feel that your IE Listening class helps you to be a better listener? If not, do you have any ideas about certain things that need to be changed in the IE Listening Program?

To start with, Questionnaire A, consisting of open-response questions was distributed to 6 out of 18 classes in May, 2000, all of the 222 students in class that day returning the forms, and to 12 teachers, of whom, 9 returned the forms. Next, interviews were conducted with 15 students (randomly chosen from class lists), 6 teachers, and the 2 program coordinators. The responses from Questionnaire A were used to develop Questionnaire B, consisting of close-response questions with Likert scales, and it was distributed to 12 classes in July, 2000. Of the 417 students enrolled in the classes, 370 answered Questionnaire B. For each level, IE Listening I, II, III, Questionnaire (type A and B) was utilized, for a total of 592 students. Table 2 describes the number of registered students in an IE class, which questionnaire type was employed, and whether the IE teacher at the level was scheduled for an interview or for a questionnaire.

Table 1. Participants in this research

	Students	Teachers	Coordinators
Interviews	15	6	2
Questionnaire A	222	9	0
Questionnaire B	370	0	0
Observations	9 classes		

Table 2. Number of students in each class and method used

	IE Level	Number of Registered Students	Questionnaire Type	Interview / Questionnaire for Teachers
1	I	46	A	Interview
2	I	45	A	Interview
3	I	44	B	Questionnaire
4	I	46	B	Questionnaire
5	I	45	B	Questionnaire
6	I	43	B	Questionnaire
7	II	22	A	Interview
8	II	22	B	Questionnaire
9	II	20	B	Questionnaire
10	III	46	A	Interview
11	III	41	A	Interview
12	III	46	B	Interview
13	III	21	B	Interview
14	III	46	A	Questionnaire
15	III	45	B	Questionnaire
16	III	46	B	Questionnaire
17	III	22	B	Questionnaire
18	III	19	B	Questionnaire

Below is a brief summary of this research since the data is too large to include here. Beside each point is the questionnaire type and interview data that supports it (See Kikuchi, 2001 for a complete explanation). The abbreviations for the tools are as follows: (a). COB: Classroom Observation, (b) PCI: Program Coordinators' Interview, (c) SQA: Students Questionnaire A, (d) SQB: Students' Questionnaire B, (e) SI: Students Interview, (f) TI: Teachers Interview, and (g) TQ: Teachers' Questionnaire

A. Learners' target tasks

- Many students want to use English when they watch *movies, travel, or study abroad*. (SQB, SQA, SI, TI, TQ)
- Most of the students *will not likely use English in their future jobs* (TI, PCI)

B. Learners' problems

- Many students have a hard time with unknown vocabulary, colloquial expressions, and faster speech. (SQB, SQA, SI, TI, TQ, PCI)
- Many students feel that more variety in the materials focusing on daily conversational English is preferable to the existing materials. (SQB, SQA, COB)

C. Learners' priorities

- Materials need to be taken from broader sources. (SQB, SQA, TI, TQ, PCI)
- Students are interested in popular songs and entertainment shows. (SQB, SQA, TI)

D. Learners' abilities

- Students who have been abroad are usually better than who haven't. (SQB, SQA)
- Many students are limited to doing simple face-to-face conversations. (SQB, SI)
- Some students felt their English has not improved. (SI)

E. Learners' attitudes

- Many students do not have strong attitudes 'either liking or disliking' toward the IE listening program. (SQB, SQA, SI)
- Some students pointed out *a lack of variety in materials and classroom tasks*. (SQB, SQA, SI)

F. Solutions

- To focus more on daily conversational skills, participants suggested *using a variety of video materials and classroom tasks*. (SQB, SQA, TI, TQ, PCI)
- The suggestion was made to *divide a 90-minute class into two sessions*: one for learning about daily conversational expressions and another for watching the video material that is currently used. (SQA)
- The use of *short passages or conversations in English*, rather than 20 minute long video segments was suggested. (SQA)

The results of the survey suggest that the IE listening classes should incorporate more diverse listening materials as well as materials of varied length. Also, they should address some learner problems with vocabulary, colloquial expressions, and speed of delivery. Another proposal from the survey was the idea of splitting each listening class into distinct listening and conversation sections.

In consequence, the course developers made efforts to acquire new listening materials, particularly to identify suitable short segments from popular films, and to select music videos, and short news items. They did not follow the suggestion to divide the IE Listening classes into listening and speaking sections because the students were already doing extensive discussions and speaking activities in the IE Core class. In addition, the IE Listening classes were generally much larger and the listening teachers were uncomfortable with the idea of teaching

speaking. Likewise, the student response that listening speed was a problem was not addressed, either. The course developers agreed that this student response might indicate a general comprehension problem. However, the course developers decided to revise the IE Listening units to incorporate work on vocabulary and colloquial expressions, and tasks to encourage more pair and small group activities, and therefore, more opportunity for speaking practice.

A review was undertaken of the current research on listening comprehension. Work was begun on a new IE Listening unit that would incorporate appropriate teaching methodology and meet the requirements of student interest. The plan was for this unit to serve as a template for a revision of the existing listening materials and the development of new units.

New listening activities

The review of the research on listening comprehension suggested that the methodology that had been employed to develop the course was limited and potentially flawed. The extensive use of discreet-point listening activities that utilize traditional reading comprehension exercises such as true/false, multiple choice, matching, and short answer items is frequently criticized. Morley (1995) argues that although listening for "discreet-point information" is the most widespread approach in teaching listening, it is "the quiz-show format of teaching," thinly-disguised testing and it fails to impart strategic listening skills to students (p.189).

To replace this methodology, researchers have called for a more interactive approach that would include speaking and critical thinking tasks and better reflect the complexity of real world

listening tasks (Mendelsohn, 1995; Rubin, 1995). Uhl Chamot and O'Malley (1994) note that a listener's prior knowledge has been shown to be particularly helpful for listening comprehension. Mendelsohn (1995) proposes that listening teachers provide students with strategy training, including the use of contextual clues to activate their prior knowledge of a topic, or to determine character and relationships, and to apply the information gained from the listening to an extension task of speaking or writing which replicates what people naturally do while listening. In consequence, the course developers determined to create a sample or template listening unit that would incorporate these types of tasks and do so with pair and small group work.

The tasks were incorporated into a unit based on a 20-minute segment of the movie, *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*, an IE III Listening unit illustrating the themes of inter-racial relationships. The unit is divided into pre-listening, listening, and post-listening sections that introduce specific language learning strategies that call upon students to access their background knowledge and make predictions, inferences about characters and their relationships as well as to use the information to interact with each other and to express opinions. The tasks were suggested by those found in *Video in Action: Recipes for Using Video in Language Teaching* (Stempleski & Tomalin, 1990).

Pre-listening (accessing prior knowledge)

Because students need to access their background knowledge of a topic, one task in the unit has them predict the incidents in a scene before they listen to it, then revise these predictions after subsequent viewing and discussion with their classmates. The teacher can accomplish this by establishing the context of the scene, for example, by showing a few minutes of the

movie, then having students predict what they are going to see and hear. The teacher can also encourage students to make predictions by giving them several key words from the story, or providing a list of the main events which the students attempt to order correctly.

The next prediction task in the unit consists of a list of the incidents that occur in the first scene of *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*. The students use their prior knowledge of the natural progression of a typical romantic relationship and grammatical clues (tense in this case) from the sentences to predict the order of events. After watching the entire first scene of the movie without sound (to set the context) students work together to anticipate the sequence of events in John and Joanna's relationship. Rubin (1995) notes that the use of video for listening allows students to use contextual clues, along with listening, to understand a listening segment which may be beyond their language abilities. The students number the events, then listen to the movie again, compare their answers with a partner, then the teacher checks them with the class and writes the correct order on the board. In this way, students feel satisfied with their rapid comprehension of a rather complicated order of events.

While-listening (understanding characters and relationships)

Another type of listening task is to make use of visual and language clues to gain a deeper understanding of a story's main characters. Students can employ a variety of clues such as body language, facial expression, and intonation to infer the relationships between characters (Mendelsohn, 1995). In this task, students are asked to discuss their general impression of each character's personality. After watching

the 20-minute segment, students choose adjectives from a list in order to describe the main characters in the movie. For example, Joanna may be described as “naïve” since she fails to see any complications to her proposed marriage. Afterward, the students discuss the reasons for their choices.

In a related task, students analyze the language register of the characters for its formality or informality in order to determine the social relationships between characters, and their feelings toward one another. The use of specific titles, for example, “Dr.” or “Sir,” or simply addressing one another by their first names, reveals a great deal about the characters’ inter-relationships.

Post-listening (extension tasks)

In second language classrooms, post-listening tasks provide students with an opportunity to reintegrate listening with other skills such as discussion and writing. Students use the information they have gained by watching and listening to judge each character’s attitude toward the situation. They are asked to choose a statement that most closely reflects the attitude of each of the main characters. They are asked to choose which character might feel that love is more important than any considerations of race in a marriage. In pairs, the students defend their choices. This provides an opportunity for critical thinking as well as interaction.

At the end of this unit, a letter writing activity follows the discussion. Students write a letter to a friend (from the point of view of one of the main characters) asking for advice on the marriage. In pairs, they exchange letters and write replies, clarifying their opinions on the topic of inter-racial marriage. Finally, they return the letter to the first writers, who read the responses.

Conclusion

Since the study was completed in 2001, the program coordinators have begun revising the other listening units in the course in order to incorporate more varied listening tasks. That work has involved teachers in the IE program in helping to develop IE Listening units such as *Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner*. Work has also begun on creating listening tasks for short news items and music videos. However, to effectively implement the revised course, the assessment of the students in the IE Listening course will also have to change. Students will have to be graded on their participation in class and on their preparation for class in the form of assignments or extra listening homework. Meetings have been held with IE Listening teachers to discuss appropriate assignments. A more comprehensive orientation for the listening teachers and more frequent meetings over the year will also form an important part in improving the IE listening classes. Brown (1995) comments, “Involve all the participants in the process of curriculum development. Remember that much more can be accomplished through discussion and compromise than through dictated policy decisions and inflexibility” (p. 190).

Finally, as this short paper on revising a listening course suggests, curriculum development is an ongoing process that should be informed by changes in language teaching methodology. It is also one where course developers need to be aware of student and teacher perceptions of a course and of the obstacles that exist to implementing changes to it.

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