



Listening journals: Promoting learner autonomy

Tomoko Kawachi
Seikei University

Reference Data:

Kawachi, T. (2007). Listening journals: Promoting learner autonomy.
In K. Bradford-Watts (Ed.), *JALT 2006 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

Students may take a passive role in their English studies during formal school education years. However, in order to become truly proficient learners and users of English, students need to continue their studies as autonomous learners after formal education has been completed. This action research studied the effect of a listening journal assignment incorporated in a university English course with a view to nurture learner autonomy. In this assignment, students selected listening materials and methods on their own and wrote about their learning experience. Through this assignment, students came to have increased awareness of learning resources available in their surrounding environment, and started to move towards more active and reflective learning. At the same time, student responses also highlighted the importance of providing sufficient guidance and support to learners in their paths to autonomous learning.

学校の授業という枠組みの中では学習者は受身の姿勢で英語学習に取り組むことも可能である。しかし、英語を真に使いこなすためには、学校教育を終えてからも継続して英語学習を続ける自律的な学習態度が肝要である。本アクション・リサーチでは、筆者が学習者の自律的な学習態度を養成する目的で大学の授業に取り入れた「リスニング・ジャーナル」という学習課題の効果を検証した。この課題では、学習者自身が授業外でリスニング教材およびその活用法を選択し、その学習体験をジャーナルに綴った。この課題に取り組む中で、学生が身の回りにおける学習資源に対する認識を高め、また、積極的・内省的な学習態度に移行し始める様子が認められた。一方で、自律的な学習態度を養成する過程において指導者が学習者に十分なガイダンスを提供することの重要性が改めて認識された。

With increasing demand for English as a global language in the areas of business, politics, and academics, the enthusiasm and the pressure to learn English in Japan are increasing. What often seems to be lacking, however, is the basic notion that it takes time, patience, and perseverance to acquire a foreign language (Saitoh, 2003), and that successful learners inevitably take active roles in the process. Learner involvement is especially important at the tertiary level, which, for many students, is the final stage of formal language education.

With the hope that my students recognize that language is not something that can somehow be given by the teacher (Bray & Harsch, 1996), but that needs to be obtained proactively in and outside the classroom, I have incorporated the practice of *listening journals* into my university freshman English course. In this practice, students listened to English outside class on their own on a regular basis and then kept a record of the content and reflections on the experience in a journal.

I had three main objectives in incorporating this assignment. First of all, I wanted students to have increased exposure to spoken English, as the thirteen-week freshmen English course met only once a week for 90 minutes and because the students' exposure to the spoken mode of English has often been lacking during their previous English learning experiences. Second, I wanted students to move towards autonomous learning. It is important for learners to obtain the tools and strategies to study independently on their own after formal education is over (Allwright, 1981), since language learning is a life-long endeavor (Thomson, 1996, cited in Lee, 1998). I hoped the listening journal activity would provide students with such skills to manage their own learning and to continue learning after my course was completed. Third, in order to continue to learn, it is important that students maintain a high level of motivation. I hypothesized that providing an additional opportunity where students are themselves free to choose the learning materials and methods they find interesting and deem relevant to their needs, proficiencies, and learning styles would work to raise the level of motivation. Such experience is likely to lead to a successful learning outcome, which, in turn, leads

to a greater level of interest in learning, thereby creating a virtuous circle of self-directed learning.

In this study, I investigate how the listening journal assignment affected student attitudes towards English learning, with a view to discover how I may adjust and modify the practice in future courses. In particular, I explore whether and how the listening journal promoted learner autonomy in students. Accordingly, I have posed the following research questions.

Did the listening journal assignment:

1. increase students' awareness of a vast array of English learning materials at their disposal in their surrounding environment?
2. raise students' awareness of their particular needs, goals, and processes, and help reflect upon their learning?
3. motivate students to study English on their own?

In the next section, I turn to the literature on learner autonomy, and look at journal keeping as a potential aid to promoting learner autonomy, as well as the benefits of out-of-class learning.

Review of literature

Learner autonomy

Autonomy in the language learning context has been defined by various researchers and is often associated with the concepts of self-directed learning, learner-centered learning, and self-access (Benson, 1997; Benson, 2001; Dickinson,

1987; Holec, 1981; Nunan, 1997; Pennycook, 1997; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Holec (1981)'s definition, "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3) is perhaps the most frequently cited in the literature. Learner autonomy has been seen as an important goal of language education in recent years (Benson & Voller, 1997; Cotterall, 1995; Schmenk, 2005). At the same time, many researchers also agree that only a limited number of learners are completely self-directed, especially at the beginning (Allwright, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Nunan, Lai, & Keobke, 1999). Accordingly, researchers typically claim that it is crucial to incorporate a learner training component into a language instruction curriculum in order to promote autonomy (Cotterall, 1995; Dickinson, 1987; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). For example, Cotterall (2000) claims that it is vital that teachers introduce activities which instigate increased learner awareness, reflection, and insight into the learning processes.

Journal writing

One way that critical reflection may be promoted is by encouraging learners to keep a journal about their learning. The benefits of journal writing as a means to reflective learning have also been discussed by a number of researchers (Bray & Harsch, 1996; Carroll, 1994; Matsumoto, 1996; McNamara & Deane, 1995; Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman & Conrad, 1990), though less frequently in direct reference to listening practices outside the classroom (Nunan et al., 1999).

Porter et al. (1990) claim that journal writing has the potential of encouraging students both to ask questions about learning and to reflect upon those questions, which in turn cultivates the ability to form independent ideas, consequently

leading to autonomous learning. Matsumoto (1996) also reports that retrospective diary-keeping tasks help raise learners' awareness of the learning processes and reflect on systematic learning.

Using resources beyond the institutional context

Out-of-class-learning is a fairly new area of investigation (Benson, 2001). Ryan (1997) suggests that the development of communication technology associated with globalization has narrowed the gap between ESL (English as a Second Language) and EFL (English as a Foreign Language) in terms of the richness of readily available learning resources outside the formal language learning setting. Ryan argues that such resources are underutilized, and has worked to develop a course aiming to raise learners' awareness of how resources available in their environment may be utilized. He claims such a course will prepare students to select and utilize learning resources in their environment, and sets the precondition for self-directed learning.

A concept which has developed in tandem with the notion of learner autonomy is the self-access center (Wenden, 2002). As Sheerin (1997) points out, however, self-access facilities do not automatically lead to independent learning, as it is possible that students are learning individually, yet constantly relying on others in making learning decisions, monitoring their learning, and evaluating their progress. In addition, construction of a self-access center requires a great amount of time, energy, and money (Sheerin, 1991). Given that self-access centers will not be available for learners once they depart from the institutions in which they are housed, it seems crucial that students become aware of resources

available outside the institutional context, and be able to locate necessary resources as learning needs arise.

Method

Context and participants

The context of my study was a private university in western Tokyo, more specifically, first-year English classes in the Faculty of Law. I incorporated the listening journal into a 13-week course entitled *Intensive Listening*, which I taught to four different classes. A total of approximately 74 students regularly attended the four classes, which varied from 10 to 25 students in size.

Listening journal

At the beginning of the course, I introduced the practice of keeping a listening journal to the students, and an assignment that involved: (1) listening to English outside of class via a media of their choice for at least 30 minutes each week, and (2) keeping a log of what they listened to, what they learned and/or noticed, what they felt was difficult, interesting, *etc.* I supplied students with a list of Internet websites where they could listen to English news such as *Voice of America*, *Weekly Student Times*, *BBC*, as well as suggested listening materials such as films and songs as a starting point. I told students, however, not to limit themselves to the materials I introduced. I did not prescribe a format for the journal, but when asked about the length of each entry, I suggested about half a page handwritten on A4 loose leaf paper as a rule of thumb. Students had the option of writing the journal in either English or Japanese.

I collected the journal every two weeks, made comments, and then returned them a week later. My comments consisted of suggestions on materials and ways of listening, requests for elaboration or clarification, general encouragement, and personal reactions. The listening journal comprised 10 percent of the final grade.

Data collection

I collected two sources of data to assess student reactions on this project. The first was the anonymous post-course questionnaire which I designed to elicit students' feedback on the listening journal assignment. I first asked students to report their journal submission rate as well as the time they spent listening to English for the assignment. Next, I asked whether, through the listening journal assignment, students discovered new listening materials which they were not aware of prior to the course. I also asked whether students felt the listening journal was beneficial and the reasons behind their perceptions, to examine what factors led them to assess their experience either positively or negatively. To assess whether the students discovered the learning resources essential for self-instructed learning, I asked if they came across learning materials and methods that worked for them as they worked on the assignment. In addition, to address my third research question, I asked how the journal assignment impacted students' level of confidence, motivation, and intention to continue listening to English outside class on their own. Finally, I asked about the problems students encountered and potential areas of improvement of the listening journal assignment, since the ultimate goal of my action research was to gain insights on how the assignment

may better help nurture student autonomy. (For a full list of the questionnaire items, see Appendix 1.)

The second source of data was students' journal entries themselves. Each time I collected the journals, I asked students to hand in past journal entries as well, in order to facilitate a recursive analysis of the journals.

Analysis

In order to examine how the listening journal affected students' attitudes towards English and English learning, I analyzed the questionnaire results, categorizing responses into three *a priori* areas of inquiry which I posed in my research questions: (1) awareness of wealth of learning materials available, (2) awareness of and reflection on the students' learning experience, and (3) increased motivation leading to continued learning. In addition, I studied the responses to question items asking about various difficulties learners faced and suggestions for future listening journal practices, and categorized them according to themes which emerged.

As for the second component, the students' journal entries, I examined whether the contents reflected student responses to the questionnaire items. I used the questionnaire items as the framework for the journal entry analysis, looking for evidence of students' reflections and actions pertaining to the aforementioned areas of inquiry. In other words, the student journals shed light on the questionnaire responses and provided more in-depth data which were not asked in the questionnaire, as well as served to validate the results by enabling triangulation of data sources (Burns, 1999).

Results

Journal submission rate

Sixty-three students responded to the post-course questionnaire. Of these, almost 90% reported that they had submitted the listening journal during the semester (shown in Figure 1). Almost half of the students reported submitting the journal more than 90% of the time, while 21% reported 70-80% and 50-60 % submission rates, respectively (Fig. 2). Approximately 10% of the students admitted they did not submit the journal at all. Since the main aim of this research is to study how the listening journal affected the students, the following discussion focuses on responses provided by the 55 students who reported submitting the journal throughout the semester.

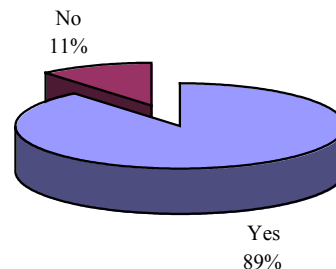
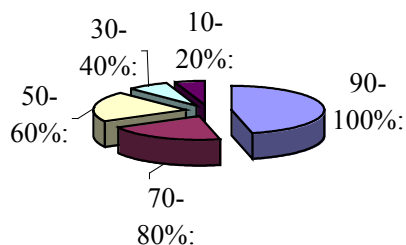


Figure 1. Q1.1: Did you submit the journal?



90-100%: 46%, 70-80%: 21%, 50-60%: 21%, 30-40%: 7%, 10-20%: 5%

Figure 2. Q1.2: If yes, what was your journal submission rate?

Awareness of learning materials

More than two thirds of the students reported discovering new listening materials through the activity in the questionnaire (Fig. 3). Among the newly discovered resources, the most popular were the Internet websites and English language programs on TV.

Some students indicated appreciation of the discovery of new English resources in their journal entries as well. For example, one student wrote: “I feel lucky that I’ve learned about websites where I can listen to English for free in this class” (excerpts from student journals were originally in Japanese).

With these students, my first goal for the project was achieved: learners became more cognizant of the English studying resources which they can utilize without investing a large amount of money or commuting to language schools. In other words, the basic infrastructure for learner autonomy was established.

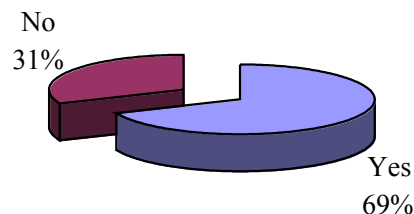


Figure 3: Q3: Did you discover new materials?

Awareness of and reflection on learning experience “Listening” of the listening journal

Almost all the students indicated that the “listening” part of the journal experience was beneficial (Fig. 4). Nearly half of those who responded positively indicated increased exposure to spoken English as the most beneficial aspect of the listening activity. Other students reported they were able to improve their listening skills, that they enjoyed the content of the listening materials, or that they formed a habit of listening to English outside class.

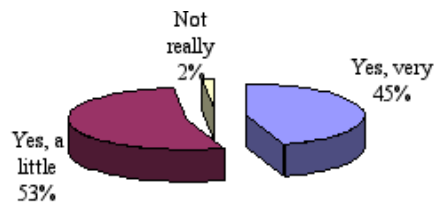


Figure 4. Q10: Was listening to English beneficial?

“Writing” of the listening journal

A majority of students also stated that the journal writing was a useful experience (Fig. 5). The most frequently cited reason was that the writing activity helped students reflect on and discover new aspects of the language, of their own learning processes, and of themselves as learners. The following journal excerpts indicate how students began to have increased awareness of their learning needs as well as the English language: “It’s difficult to listen to words with sounds that are not pronounced”; “I realized that English sounds completely different when spoken [as opposed to when read]”; “I need more vocabulary to comprehend this [material].” In other words, by writing about their learning experience, students’ awareness of their learning situation deepened.

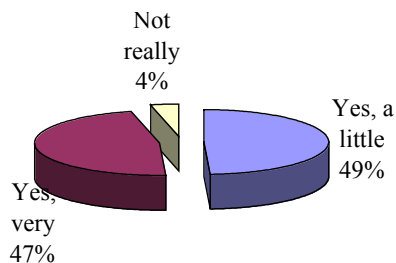


Figure 5. Q11: Was writing the journal useful?

Discovering suitable listening materials

Forty percent of the students responded they found learning materials which suited their needs, interests, and goals, while the remaining 60% responded they did not (Fig. 6). Materials identified by students who responded affirmatively varied, the most popular being films (videos, DVDs) and songs. Of greater interest were their criteria for choosing the materials. Major criteria included: (1) interest in the content, (2) level of difficulty, (3) frequency with which the materials were provided or updated, and (4) ease of access. Students also wrote in their journals that it was motivating to listen to materials which related to a topic of interest. One student wrote: “It’s motivating to listen to news about politics, because I major in it.”

At this stage, students were listening to English to gain information or to enjoy the content. In other words, students were beginning to put on the “language user” hat in addition to that of a “language learner” (Little, 1997, p. 230). That students were able to identify suitable learning materials indicates the seeds of learner autonomy, since material selection requires increased awareness towards the assessment of one’s needs, interests, and learning processes.

On the other hand, two students stated specifically that they were still in search of suitable materials. The comments also suggest that at least some students were not just using whatever materials they encountered, but were trying out different materials and assessing them against their needs and goals.

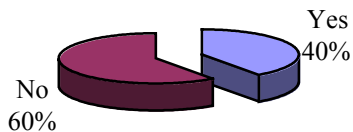


Figure 6. Q14: Did you find suitable listening materials?

Discovering suitable listening practices

Approximately 40% of students reported that they discovered listening practices that worked for them, while close to 60% reported that they did not (Fig. 7). The range of strategies that students reported using included: shadowing, repeating, listening for key words, listening for main themes, making use of subtitles/texts, summarizing in Japanese, dictating, singing along (to songs), and repeated listening. Some of these techniques were taught during class time, but others were not.

Students' journal entries suggested students were using many other techniques, methods, and strategies not referred to in the questionnaire responses, such as inferencing, predicting, making use of paralinguistic features, dividing long passages into manageable pieces, and using *karaoke* to practice English songs. Their writing suggests that many of these strategies were discovered through trial and error during the listening journal practice. By owning the process of trial and error, students discovered learning strategies that met their needs and learning styles.

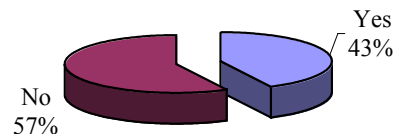


Figure 7. Q15: Did you find good listening practices?

Increased motivation leading to continue learning

Amount of time spent listening to English

Sixty percent of the students reported that they listened to English 30 minutes or more per week, which was the minimal requirement I initially set forth. Of these, 14% reported spending an hour or more per week. Overall the remaining 40% allocated less than 30 minutes of their weekly schedule to listening to English as part of the class assignment.

Perceived level of improvement

Questionnaire responses indicated that 84% of students felt the listening journal assignment improved their listening skills (Fig. 8). In asking this question, I was more interested in *perceived* rather than actual improvement, since it is often when the students perceive learning outcome to be successful that they are likely to continue to learn (Dörnyei, 2001; Oxford, 1990). Students wrote about increased listening proficiency in their journals as well, although some occasionally expressed concerns about their improvement:

“I’ve come to comprehend the contents quite well while shadowing, although I still look at the text”; “I feel my ears have gotten used to [English] compared to when I did my first journal activity”; “I got a little worried as to whether I will actually get used to [English] just by listening...”

According to Holec (1981), the ability to assess one’s progress is an aspect of autonomous learning. In this respect, the evidence that students spontaneously evaluated their progress and discussed it in their journals itself suggests a move towards autonomous learning.

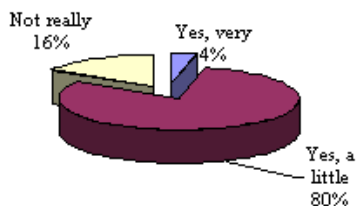


Figure 8. Q6: Did the listening journal improve your listening skills?

Motivation and intention to continue the listening practice

A strong positive impact of the listening journal was observed in the level of learner motivation. A total of 91% of students reported their motivation to study English increased through the listening journal (Fig. 9).

Finally, students reported whether they intended to continue studying English using the materials they used for the listening journal assignment upon completion of the

course. A mere 7% of the students stated they will definitely continue their self-study (Fig. 10). One student wrote in his journal: “I can comprehend the contents better than before, but only in fragments, so I cannot grasp the whole picture. But I’m glad I’m progressing. I would like to continue [the listening practice].” Another student recalled: “Before taking this class, I used to think listening to English was a pain. But the other day, surprisingly, I was able to comprehend an English announcement on the train, and realized the effect of this course. I would like to continue the listening practice.” Such comments highlight how successful learning experience leads to increased learner motivation.

At the same time, 71% expressed their interest in continuing the listening practice “if possible.” Such responses indicated that although the students appreciated the value of the practice, they were not determined enough to make a strong commitment to further study, given other priorities in their daily lives.

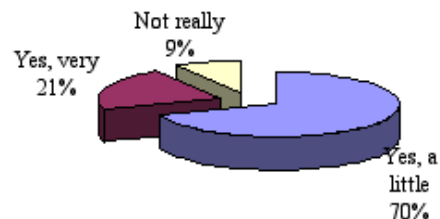


Figure 9. Q13: Did the journal motivate you to study English?

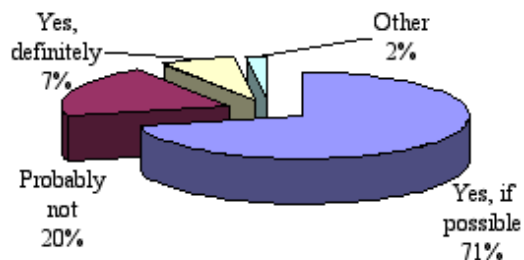


Figure 10. Q16: Do you intend to continue self-study?

Difficulties and problems learners encountered

Half of the students stated they experienced problems on working on the listening journal assignment, while the other half said they did not (Fig. 11). The most frequently cited problem was confusion about what was expected to do: how students should select the materials, what methods they should employ when listening, and what they should write in the journal. Such confusion was also expressed in the final section of the questionnaire where they were invited to provide general comments or suggestions on improving the listening journal practice. Several students wrote that more guidance or instruction would be helpful: “It might have been easier if the materials were decided [by the instructor]”; “I think it’s easier if you gave us more concrete assignments”; “It might have been better if we had been given clearer advice as to what we should write in our journals according to the types of materials used.”

The comments indicate that students preferred to remain in a traditional role, expecting the teacher to know the best ways of learning, and to lead them along the “right” path, rather than having to struggle through the path of uncertainty.

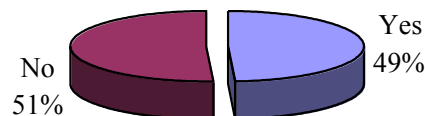


Figure 11. Q4: Did you experience any difficulties?

Discussion

On analyzing students’ journal entries and questionnaire responses, I observed seeds of autonomy. To begin with, students came to have increased awareness towards learning resources available in their surrounding environment. For many, it was also their first experience of listening to a large amount of spoken English. By utilizing the resources and writing about the experience, students began to reflect on and learn about aspects of the language and about themselves as language learners which they had not taken heed of in the past. During this experience, they had tried out different materials and listening methods based on their interests, proficiency levels, and the accessibility of the materials. In this way, they were assessing and making decisions about their learning. In other words, they were starting to take

some “control over their learning” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). In addition, the listening journal practice had brought about increased learner confidence and motivation towards English learning to the level where most of them expressed their desire to “want to continue” the practice after the course is over.

At the same time, many students were not quite prepared for self-directed learning. In particular, at the beginning, students were uneasy about having to make decisions about their learning on their own, since this was not something they were used to. Though some of them overcame this concern over the thirteen weeks, a considerable number of students still expressed their desire for more structure and guidelines on the journal assignment from the instructor at the end of the course. Moreover, more than half of the students were unable to find materials and listening practices that really worked for them. This suggests that perhaps they need more support in the process of “learning how to learn” (Little, 1997, p. 230). Put another way, students were beginning to acquire “receptive autonomy,” but not “proactive autonomy” (Littlewood, 1999, p. 75).

An important implication of this research, then, is that students need more scaffolding in their journey to autonomous learning. As Littlejohn (1985) states, we as language teachers need to move slowly in incorporating choice as part of a language course since learners are not accustomed to making choices in their learning. By providing a list of listening resources, sample journal writing excerpts, comments on students’ journal entries and occasionally introducing listening techniques, I had intended to facilitate the students’ self-directed learning.

I had also tried to be careful not to be too prescriptive in my instructions, since I wanted the students to use their imagination and discover their own way of learning through trial and error, rather than imposing my version of *autonomous learning* on them. However, student responses suggest that they needed more groundwork and aid before they can move towards a higher level of self-directed learning (Sheerin, 1991). Accordingly, following are the two pedagogical changes I would make for future courses.

First, I would spend more time and energy in orienting students to the listening journal practice, so that students fully understand the goals and objectives of the listening journal: that the process of trial and error is as important as learning the language itself in order for them to discover appropriate materials and methods which will lead to continued learning, and that it is, at times, natural to feel insecure during this process. At the same time, in order to ease students’ anxiety of not knowing where to start from or to head for, it is probably a good idea to provide more concrete guidelines on the format and content of the listening journal, supplementing them with writing samples of students from the past.

Secondly, I would provide more scaffolding by introducing more language learning and listening methods and strategies during class time, so that students may pick and choose the strategies that they feel might work for them, and apply them to out-of-class learning. I had introduced some strategies as shadowing and listening for key words in class from time to time, but a more consistent and elaborate approach would benefit the students as well as produce synergy between in-class and out-of-class learning for the students. At the

same time, it is also important to let students know that the strategies introduced are options, rather than “the way” to go about learning a language. With these scaffoldings, I believe students will feel more secure in making learning decisions by themselves and become more proactive in their learning.

In conclusion, although there are areas for further improvement, overall, I believe the listening journal assignment worked to increase students’ awareness of learning materials as well as helped them reflect deeper on their learning. Moreover, students gained increased motivation to study English. In other words, the listening journal assignment encouraged learners to make a move towards autonomous learning.

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Appendix: Post-course questionnaire (administered in Japanese)

For each of the questions below, please circle the item that best describes your thoughts about the listening journal. For open-ended questions, please write down your opinions and comments.

- Did you submit the listening journal this semester?
 - Yes
 - No

→ If yes, what was your submission rate?
100% 90% 80% 70% 60% 50% 40% 30% 20% 10%

→ If no, what do you think was the reason?

2. On average, how much time did you spend listening for the listening journal?
 - a. An hour or more per week
 - b. More than 30 minutes, but less than an hour per week
 - c. More than 15 minutes, but less than 30 minutes per week
 - d. Less than 15 minutes per week
 - e. I didn't spend much time
 - f. Others ()
3. Did you have opportunities to discover new listening materials (websites, TV shows, radio shows, films, songs, etc.) through the listening journal practice?
 - a. Yes b. No

→ If yes, please write down as many materials you discovered as you can think of.
4. Did you experience any difficulties in starting or continuing the listening journal?
 - a. Yes b. No

→ If yes, what kind of difficulties were they?
5. You had the option of writing the listening journal in English or Japanese. How did you feel about it?
 - a. It was good to have the option
 - b. We should have written it in English
6. Do you think the listening journal improved your listening skills?
 - a. Yes, very b. Yes, a little c. Not really
7. Do you think it was appropriate to submit the listening journal every two weeks?
 - a. We should have submitted it every week
 - b. Yes, it was appropriate
 - c. We should have submitted it less frequently
8. What did you think about the comments from the instructor on your listening journal?
 - a. They were helpful
 - b. They were not very helpful
 - c. They were not very helpful, but it was good to have comments
9. Was the handout from other people's listening journals helpful?
 - a. Yes, very Yes, a little. c. Not really
10. Do you think it was beneficial for you to listen to English outside of class as part of the listening journal assignment?
 - a. Yes, very b. Yes, a little c. Not really

→ Why do you think so?
11. Do you think writing the listening journal itself was useful?
 - a. Yes, very b. Yes, a little c. Not really

→ Why do you think so?

12. Do you think you have gotten into the habit of listening to English on your own through the listening journal?
 - a. Yes, very
 - b. Yes, a little
 - c. Not really
 - d. I had already formed such habit prior to the course.
13. Do you think the listening journal motivated you to study English?
 - a. Yes, very
 - b. Yes, a little
 - c. Not really
14. Did you find a particular kind of listening material which suits you through the listening journal practice?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

→ If yes, what was it, and why do you think it suits you?
15. Did you find a particular kind of listening practice (listening method, practicing method, application method) which suits you through the listening journal practice?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

→ If yes, what kind of practice was it?
16. Do you intend to continue your self-study of English using the materials you used for your listening journal?
 - a. Yes, definitely
 - b. Yes, if possible
 - c. Probably not
17. Please write down any other comments or suggestions regarding the listening journal.