

Extensive Reading, Listening, and Shadowing with Graded Reader CDs

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In our study we examined the effectiveness of using graded readers with CDs (GR-CDs) to develop both university students' listening, and their attitudes toward English in general. Built on the concept that L2 learners need a large amount of comprehensive input to develop mastery of the target language (Rost, 2011), we researched how much students' listening skills improved through GR-CD-related activities such as extensive reading (ER), listening, and shadowing over one year and how students felt about English in general after these activities. A combined quantitative and qualitative approach was employed: a pretest and posttest for listening, surveys of 58 university students, and interviews of selected students. The results suggest that GR-CDs and their related activities have the potential to enhance student motivation to learn English and make them aware of their strengths and limitations, although the activities did not lead to a significant improvement in listening.

本研究は、CDを利用したグレイデッド・リーダーズ (GR-CDs) が大学1年生のリスニングや英語に対する認識にどういった影響をもたらすかを論じる。目標言語の上達には理解可能なインプットを言語学習者が多量に受ける必要があるとする考えを応用し (Rost, 2011)、具体的には1年間にわたってGR-CDsを使った多読とリスニング、シャドーイング活動により学習者のリスニング力がどのぐらい向上したか、またこの活動を通して学習者が英語全般に対してどのような感情を抱いているか、について調査した。本研究は量的研究と質的研究の両方を使用し、事前と事後のリスニングテスト、58名の大学生へのアンケート調査、そして選択した数人の学生へのインタビューを行った。結果、GR-CDs 関連の活動は、学生のリスニング能力を著しく高めることを証明することはできなかったが、彼らの英語学習に関する動機を高め、自己の英語力の長所と短所を認識させる可能性のあることを示唆した。

STUDIES OF extensive reading (ER) have drawn a lot of attention from researchers as well as practitioners in the field of TESOL and applied linguistics (e.g., Day & Bamford, 1998; Furukawa, 2010; Krashen, 2004; Sakai & Kanda, 2005; Takase, 2010). This is because ER can provide learners with an effective way of improving their L2 reading (Yamashita, 2008). Compared to studies of ER, however, extensive listening (EL) has not been examined as much and the literature on EL is scarce.

One reason for the lack of research on EL is probably due to the nature of listening. Unlike reading, sounds only occur for a brief instant of time (Field, 2008; Tomita, Oguri, & Kawauchi, 2011), which makes EL a challenging task for students compared to ER. Listening gives students fewer chances to go back and clarify any ambiguity. Another possible reason for the lack of EL research is that it is more difficult for students to practice EL outside of class. Ware, Yonezawa, Kurihara and

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Durand (2012) and Yonezawa and Ware (2009) found that students spend very little time listening to GRs outside the classroom. When the books were at a high level and had large word counts, students usually listened to only parts of the book, not the whole thing. A third reason is that measuring EL is problematic. While the amount of ER can be recorded from the number of books or words students read, it is difficult for researchers to precisely know how much students actually listen to CDs. Although EL can be measured by recording time spent listening to books, it is challenging for students to record their listening times (Ware et al., 2012).

To deal with these difficulties, our project integrated ER with listening and shadowing to increase students' overall listening abilities. The study was based on Oyama's (2009) claim that faster readers had better listening abilities. Shadowing was included as part of listening to help students automate the process of phonetic perception (e.g., fast processing) and change their "speech knowledge database" (e.g., stress, pitch, duration, intonation; Kadota, 2007, p. 68).

Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to examine the effectiveness of GR-CDs and related activities on university students' listening skills. The research questions were:

1. Does using GR-CDs improve students' listening ability?
2. What positive effects do students perceive in GR-CD-related activities?
3. What English weaknesses do students notice through GR-CD-related activities?

Methodology

Participants

Fifty-eight 1st-year university students participated in the study in the 2013 spring and fall semesters. There were three experimental groups. The first group, majoring in international studies, had an advanced English level and consisted of 16 students. The second group, from the same department, consisted of 13 high-intermediate English students. The third group consisted of 26 basic-level students majoring in marine science. These levels were determined from the placement test that all 1st-year students took at the beginning of April.

The participants in the first and second group took the same required English courses for a year. As well as the required courses, the marine science students also took a year-long basic grammar class as an elective. All groups met four times a week for 90 minutes throughout the year.

Context

Students were provided with a mobile library of GR-CDs that they could use both during and outside of class. They were instructed on how to read, listen, and shadow before and during the project. Based on the practical and theoretical ideas of extensive reading (e.g., Furukawa, 2010; Sakai & Kanda, 2005; Takase, 2010, Yamashita, 2008), the students were given three guidelines: to choose books with a wide range of topics that were lower than their English level; to choose books they were interested in; and to read, listen, and shadow while listening as much as possible. They were told that these rules would be critical for enjoying the GRs and improving their English.

The three groups used 40 minutes for GR-CD-related activities in class each week. The 40 minutes were divided into four component activities. Students spent 10 minutes reading GRs silently,

10 minutes listening to GR-CDs using portable CD players while looking at their GRs, and 10 minutes shadowing with GR-CDs, with or without looking at the GRs. The last 10 minutes were used for interactive activities such as pair and group work. For example, students reported on their reading to others and did shadowing in pairs or groups.

For ER, students were required to read more than 40 GRs, with a total of about 150,000 words per semester. The goal of reading 150,000 words per semester was based on Furukawa (2010, p. 156), who reported positive effects on students' English ability from reading 300,000 words or more. In our study, approximately a quarter of the students read more than 80 books, amounting to 300,000 words over the year.

Students were required to submit self-reports to the teachers, recording book titles, levels, comments on the book, and the word counts of the books they read. They did not report the time spent listening outside of class.

Listening Tests

Listening sections from already out of print Eiken tests (Obunsha, 2011a & b), developed by the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), were used for the pre- and posttests. The advanced and high-intermediate students took the Eiken Level 2 test, and basic students took the Level 3 test. Both tests had 30 questions and a time limit of 25 minutes. The initial tests were administered at the beginning of the spring semester in May 2013, and the same test was administered a second time near the end of the fall semester in January 2014.

Surveys

At the end of the spring and fall semesters, in July and January, students completed surveys that examined students' views of GR-

CDs and their ideas about learning English. Fifty-three students completed the surveys.

Interviews

We employed a triangulation approach of collecting different types of data, including surveys and interviews. Out of 53 survey respondents, 14 were selected for qualitative interviews because they had read the most GRs in each class. Students who read more books were better able to analyze their own English abilities, whereas poor readers tended to respond with short answers or "yes" or "no" or to be silent during interviews. Therefore, we examined the information-rich cases in more depth.

Interviews were conducted at the end of each semester. In July and August 2013, eight students (three from the advanced group, two from the high intermediate group, and two from the basic-level group) had interviews and in January and February 2014, eight students were interviewed (two from the advanced and five from the basic-level group). The interviews usually lasted 1 hour each and were held in Japanese. After each interview we translated their responses into English.

As in our previous research (Yonezawa et al., 2012), we asked about: (a) participants' English educational background before entering university, (b) their perceived gains in English from GR-CD-related activities, and (c) the weaknesses in their English that they noticed as a result of the activities.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved both deductive and inductive methods. The data obtained from the listening tests was analyzed using Wilcoxon signed rank tests and Spearman's rank correlations. The open-ended questions in the survey and the interview data, which we focus on in this paper, were inductively analyzed using qualitative methods.

That is, the patterns, categories, and themes that emerged were grounded in the data (Patton, 2001). In order to make the qualitative data analysis more trustworthy (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985), we collaboratively coded the data. That is, we first individually analyzed interview data and then compared the results together.

Findings

Quantitative Results

The international studies majors took a different listening test than the marine science majors, so the groups were analyzed separately. A Wilcoxon signed rank test showed a small but significant increase in listening scores (median increase = 2.00, approximate $p = .028$) for the students majoring in international studies. The gain for marine science students, however, was not significant (median increase = 1.00, approximate $p = .157$). Spearman's rank correlations between listening score improvement, which was the score on the January test minus the score on the May test, and the number of words read in the first semester (from April to July), the second semester (from September to January), and throughout the year, were all close to zero and not statistically significant for either group. For international studies students, the correlations were $r_s = .13$, $r_s = .09$, and $r_s = .18$ respectively, while for the marine science students the same correlations were $r_s = .08$, $r_s = -.21$, and $r_s = -.14$. Finally, correlations between listening score improvement and the number of books completed in July, in January, and throughout the year were also close to zero (and not statistically significant, all $p > .49$) for both international studies majors ($r_s = -.14$, $r_s = -.14$, and $r_s = -.10$ respectively) and marine science majors ($r_s = .06$, $r_s = .14$, and $r_s = .08$ respectively).

Qualitative Results

Students' Perceptions of Their Strengths

Regarding reading, both the interview and the open-ended survey yielded similar results. For example, they showed that students

perceived that GRs helped students improve in reading speed and comprehension. Specifically, students were aware that silent reading helped their reading speed. In the interviews, three out of 15 interviewees said that their reading speed increased. One interview participant, T, said: "I found out that the more I read, the faster I read."

An increase in reading comprehension skills was also mentioned by eight interviewees. One of the learners, AM, said: "I came to better understand what was written in the graded readers without illustrations. As I read them, I found the stories interesting without help from the illustrations. This began to gradually change."

Students were also aware of the benefits for listening. They seemed to notice English phonological features such as contractions and elisions through GR-CD activities. This benefit became apparent when they mentioned awareness of differences between written and spoken forms. In the interview, both weak students and advanced students noted this. For example, one weak learner said,

The book that I was reading used "He is . . ." But the CD says "he's" like one connected word. This is very easy, simple English, but when I tried to do shadowing without looking at the book, I got stuck, and I thought "What's that?" I noticed the differences [between written and spoken forms].

One advanced student talked about the benefits of GR-CDs and shadowing activities. Student R said that he practiced listening and shadowing almost 30 minutes a day at home in the spring semester. R went on, saying,

In high school I learned [elisions and cohesions]. My English high school teacher persistently explained it . . . So I gained knowledge of the sound system, but the knowledge did not work. In high school I just did not listen; I just read and wrote.

In addition, in the survey some students mentioned the potential benefits of shadowing for speaking. Also, student Y said in the interview that “shadowing was just like talking,” and that she “was getting more comfortable talking in English.”

Furthermore, a number of students responded that GRs helped improve their writing, although this was limited to the advanced students. In his interview, Student T said that he had occasionally tried some expressions that he had learned from the GRs in his writing. Another student, K, said that GRs helped her write in English in a natural way:

When I wrote an essay, I tried to write a paper using big words and difficult phrases at first. But on the second draft of my paper, I changed my way of writing. I started to think that it would be OK to express what I wanted to say in an easy way.

Importantly, GRs helped enhance the motivation of lower level students who often said in class that they had rarely had the experience of finishing an English book. In the interview, all five basic level students also said that they had fun reading, listening, and shadowing. One student, S, said, “When I first read the GRs with a yellow label [i.e., a lower level book] on it, I thought there were lots of words in them . . . but I realized the books were fun.”

Finally, another benefit related to motivation was interactions among students during pair and group work. The project employed cooperative learning with GR-CDs. Seven students out of the 15 interviewees mentioned the positive effects of shadowing and reporting. For example, student E said, “When we shadowed and reported graded readers in pairs, I felt that at least I should make my voice louder. I thought that would help me shadow with a clearer voice.”

Positive effects of pair and group work were also acknowledged. Another interview student, AM said,

Because we reported what we read to classmates, we had to understand the books well. When I understood the content

well, I found the book interesting and I was happy with it. Then I thought about how I could make others understand it. . . . A member in my group happened to read the same book I had read before. And I thought like, I see, this person thought about the book that way [which was different from my interpretation/understanding].

All in all, interacting with others helped increase students’ motivation.

Students’ Perceptions of Their English Weaknesses

Students also became aware of their weaknesses through GR-CD activities. What survey participants mentioned most was lack of vocabulary, confirming the results of previous research by Ware et al. (2012) and Yonezawa, Kurihara and Durand (2013). Related to this, student E said “If I had had more knowledge of vocabulary, I would have better understood the content of the GRs I read.”

Another frequently mentioned response from the survey participants was related to awareness of grammar. However, this result might come from the fact that one of the experimental classes took an elective basic grammar course, which was not taken by students in the other two classes. Other common weaknesses mentioned in the surveys were listening skills and speaking.

Discussion

Previous research (Ware et al., 2012; Yonezawa et al., 2013; Yonezawa & Ware, 2009) with advanced students suggested that the inclusion of GR-CD activities in class triggered their motivation and enhanced their awareness of the four skills of English. Our current study shows similar results, even with lower level learners. For low-level learners, learning English was less stressful and became fun. In particular, the GR-CD activities helped these students enjoy a feeling of achievement when they finished reading a whole book.

The benefits were, though, generally limited to reading and listening. On the other hand, for advanced learners, the activities helped improve, in their perception, not only reading and listening but also other skills, like writing and speaking.

Contrary to the qualitative findings, the quantitative results did not show significant increases in listening ability as shown on listening test scores. This leads to the question of why students' perceptions of progress in their listening were not shown on their test scores.

A possible answer for this question might be related to the difficulties of measuring listening abilities. The gap between the learners' perceptions and their test scores might come from a mismatch in evaluation methods. Field (2008) pointed out the weakness of listening comprehension exams in measuring learners' listening abilities, arguing that written multiple-choice questions in listening tests might be more difficult to interpret than the recording. If learners fail to get the right answer in listening comprehension, it might be attributed as much to their "inadequate reading ability in handling the questions as to inadequate listening ability in handling the recording" (p. 28). Therefore, it is likely that the single listening comprehension test we used might not measure a slight change in students' listening ability. Rather, it might be better, at least, to give two different kinds of listening tests, including tests that include nonverbal answer choices to listening questions using pictures and charts. Dictation components could be another option.

Another limitation is many students majoring in international studies did not provide complete data for words read (data missing from 50% of students) or books read (data missing from 33% of students). This might have affected the quantitative results of the study.

Future Research

This study mixed ER and listening to examine improvements in students' listening because EL by itself is hard to implement, mean-

ing the research design itself needs to be reconsidered. In addition, the study lacked a control group, which means we cannot directly attribute students' perceived improvements to the GR-CD activities. One obvious line of future research is, therefore, to explore EL by comparing two groups: one with ER using GRs only as a control group, the other with ER using GRs plus listening and shadowing with CDs as an experimental group. Then the effects of using GRs with listening on students' listening abilities could become clearer.

Bio Data

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