

Extensive Listening Practice Using Online Materials for EFL Learners

Shizuka SAKURAI LAUWEREYNS

Abstract

Extensive listening (EL) is listening to a great amount of comprehensible and enjoyable materials so that learners can build listening fluency. The present study reports how EL was promoted using online authentic English materials, in addition to the students' perception of the EL activity. Japanese university students ($N=59$, intermediate proficiency) listened to TED talks outside class for one semester. After listening to TED talks, the students filled out reports. They were also encouraged to listen to extra talks of their choice. On average, students listened to about twenty talks during a semester ($SD=6.7$), and they repeated listening: the average was 3.6 times per talk. 83.3% of the learners reported that they enjoyed TED talks, and 76.7% wanted to continue this EL practice in future. Most of the students (90.0%) thought that listening to TED talks helped improve their listening skills. The present study also compares TED (authentic texts) with VOA Learning English (modified English texts). Despite several limitations, listening to TED talks can offer effective and enjoyable EL training that contributes to learners' autonomy and motivation.

Introduction

EL and extensive reading (ER) share similarities in some aspects; for example,

both aim to improve speed in recognizing comprehensible texts. Additionally, it is important for learners to enjoy and continue engaging with the tasks. Comparatively, EL has been an understudied area, although EL is as beneficial as ER, and is an indispensable practice to maximize exposure to the target language (Renandya, 2012). In language classrooms, EL was introduced to build listening fluency much later than ER (Haginoya, 2013). Nowadays, digital technology has advanced greatly, and many students have easy access to listening materials (authentic and modified), utilizing their portable devices and access to the internet. Learners can choose a variety of English audio materials from many web sites for free. But how can learners select the right materials and practice listening efficiently using those sites? How can teachers encourage and support learners' EL activities, especially outside the classroom? The present study explores effective ways to implement EL at university level, and investigates learners' perception of EL using two types of online materials: "TED (Technology, Entertainment and Design) Ideas worth spreading" (<https://www.ted.com>, henceforth TED) and "VOA (Voice of America) Learning English" (<http://learningenglish.voanews.com>, henceforth VOA). TED offers authentic materials, whereas VOA provides modified reading and listening materials for EFL learners.

Previous studies on extensive listening

Extensive listening is a language learning practice "to listen to easily understandable material in order to build listening fluency" (Brown, 2011: 106). Listening fluency refers to the speed and automaticity of oral language processing (Rost, 2011). It is beneficial to provide exercises to improve learners' listening fluency because speech rate is often reported as the biggest source of listening problems even for advanced listeners (Griffiths, 1992; Rosenhouse, Haik, & Kishon-Rabin, 2006). If EL is successful, it can offer a great amount of listening input that is effective and enjoyable for an extended period of time, which promotes learners' autonomy.

However, Waring (2010) claims that many learners try EL and stop it soon because they select inappropriate listening materials. Without appropriate

materials, L2 learners will lose their motivation to continue with EL practice (Renandya, 2012). Waring stresses that learners should work on materials of which they can understand 90% or more of the content, and 95% of the vocabulary, without stopping the recordings. He also warns teachers to be careful about using authentic listening materials because authentic English texts are too difficult for the vast majority of Japanese learners. Ducker and Saunders (2014: 383) also mention several problems with authentic listening materials: “fatigue, difficulties with idiomatic language, and difficulties with connected speech.”

However, authentic materials can have their own merits. According to Field (2002; 2008), it is advisable to expose learners to spontaneous oral input early on in language learning. Through authentic materials, students can learn natural features of utterances such as hesitations and false starts. Authentic passages are much closer to real life. Field claims that learners should develop the strategies to handle authentic input which they understand only partially. Takaesu (2013) states that EL practice using TED talks was perceived positively by learners because it improved their listening comprehension, and raised their motivation. She claims that it is important to provide scaffolding activities that can help learners deal with challenging input.

Extensive listening practice using authentic materials has received scant attention. There is room for discussion on what are “appropriate materials.” There is also a need for investigation into how authentic materials are perceived by learners. EL materials should be compatible with the learners’ proficiency levels. However, teachers may aim occasionally to use challenging authentic listening texts that are interesting and motivating for learners. The present research tries to demonstrate how EL can be implemented using online authentic materials and to reveal EL’s potential benefits and learner’s preferences.

Research questions

To improve listening skills, it is important to increase the amount of time that learners are exposed to English input. Choosing appropriate materials is a difficult task for teachers since appropriateness varies among learners. Unfortunately,

there are not many graded materials for EL available. TED was selected because the online site is well-known and accessible to students for free, and the varieties of English and topics are offered by people from different ethnic and professional backgrounds. The length, speech rate, and presentation visuals of talks are varied, too. Therefore, students and teachers can find talks suitable for their EL practice. If necessary, students can utilize transcriptions and subtitles in English and their native language to aid comprehension. Teachers can recommend audio recordings supplementing graded readers; audiobooks can be also used as EL materials. However, there might be availability issues: not all graded readers come with the CDs, and sometimes interesting books might be checked out from the students' library.

An important step preparatory to investigating effective EL methods is to explore learners' EL practice patterns and their preferences. EL can be beneficial only when it is continuously practical and attractive to learners. Listening to authentic English such as TED can be challenging for most learners. However, it is questionable whether or not the challenge will reduce motivation and the practice effect. Thus, the following questions remain open.

1. How is EL using TED talks implemented by learners outside class?
2. How is EL practice perceived by learners in terms of difficulties, effectiveness, and motivation?
3. What are the benefits and limitations of EL (TED)?

The present study investigates if TED talks can be one of the beneficial EL resources for intermediate-level learners while comparing them with another site with modified texts (VOA).

Methods

Participants

Fifty-nine female students participated in this study. They belonged to two groups of intermediate-level first-year academic English classes, one of which was assigned to the TED group (Group 1, N=30), and the other to the TED & VOA group (Group 2, N=29). Most of the students had not viewed TED or VOA prior

to the courses. Group 1 (TOEFL ITP average: 510.3, SD 12.3) is the main group of the study. The subjects listened to TED talks as assignments outside class for one semester. The follow-up study was conducted with Group 2 (TOEFL ITP average: 445.8, SD 10.8). The learners listened to both TED and VOA Learning English (with modified texts for EFL learners). Group 2 had listening practice using both types of sources, and the students were asked to compare the two types.

EL practices

Group 1 received EL assignments using TED talks for one semester. The students had orientation sessions on EL and TED. The learners watched short TED talks in class at the beginning of the semester, and were instructed on how to utilize the site. The learners were advised to repeat listening to a talk a few times to improve comprehension and listening fluency. When listening to TED presentations, the students were allowed to use subtitles and transcriptions. But the students were required to listen to the entire talk more than once without relying on any subtitles or transcripts. Some TED talks were pre-selected by the teacher. The topics of the selected TED talks were related to the topics of lectures that the learners viewed during classes. In addition to the teacher-selected talks, the learners were encouraged to listen to other talks of their choice. The assigned talks were obligatory to listen to, while the extra talks were optional. The students filled out a report every week on the TED talks they listened to (see Appendix A for an example).

To the students of Group 2, similar EL exercises were assigned as well. However, the subjects worked on two online sites: TED and VOA Learning English. VOA Learning English offers easier listening (mostly audio recordings, some videos) and reading materials which are simplified for learners. It is also supplemented with glossaries. There were TED and VOA assignments for three weeks each. The purpose of using two types was to ask the participants to compare authentic and modified listening EL materials.

Questionnaire

At the end of the semester, surveys were administered to gauge learners' perceptions of EL training using the online materials. There were seven questions with multiple-choice answers (4-likert scales). Group 2 had the same questions on both TED and VOA.

1. Did you work on the TED talk assignment seriously?
2. Did you enjoy listening to TED talks during the semester?
3. Do you want to continue listening to TED talks even after this semester is over?
4. Do you think that listening to TED talks helped you improve your listening skills?
5. What are the good points of TED?
6. What are the bad points of TED?
7. Please write your comments on TED talks.

Results

EL practice using TED talks

The average of assignment completion rate was 95.4%; the students (Group 1, N=30) submitted most of the TED assignments. However, as for the optional practice (listening to TED talks of their choice in addition to the assigned talk), the students' submission rate was 60%. Therefore, most students did their EL assignments, though they did not listen to extra talks every week. Including the optional talks, the students listened to an average of 20 TED talks in total during the semester (SD=6.7, Max=40, Min=8), 1.3 talks per week. The students tended to listen to the same talk a few times: the average was 3.6 times per talk.

The use of subtitles was allowed, although the learners had to listen to a talk without these aids at least once. Table 1 shows the frequency of the use of subtitles while viewing a TED presentation. The learners tended to select English subtitles more often than Japanese subtitles (significant difference, *t*-test: $p < .01$). However, they were making efforts to listen to talks without subtitles: 1.5 times per talk, which was more frequent than the use of English subtitles (significant

difference, $p < .05$). The use of Japanese subtitles was also noticeable (0.9 times); the learners viewed a TED presentation with Japanese subtitles once, probably to improve or check their comprehension.

Table 1. The average use of subtitles while listening to a TED talk (Group 1, N=29)

| No subtitles | English subtitles | Japanese subtitles | Total |
|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| 1.5 times (SD=0.4) | 1.2 times (SD=0.3) | 0.9 times (SD=0.3) | 3.6 times (SD=0.7) |

Each weekly assignment consisted of two sections, a teacher-selected talk (obligatory) and learner-selected talk (optional). The talks selected by the teacher differed in length: from 3.37 to 15.6 minutes (the mean=529.6 seconds, 8.8 minutes, SD=287 seconds, 4.8 minutes). The learners in Groups 1 and 2 tended to choose shorter talks (Table 2). Among the talks the students chose, thirty TED talks were randomly chosen for the analysis. The mean length of the 30 TED talks was 352 seconds, 5.9 minutes, which was shorter than that of the teacher-selected talks. However, the length of the TED talks varied (SD=232.5 seconds, 3.9 minutes, max=1105 seconds, min=135 seconds). As for the length of VOA texts chosen by Group 2 (N=29), it was shorter than that of TED: the mean=247 seconds, 4.1 minutes; the difference was significant ($p < .05$). The standard deviation of VOA was much smaller than that of TED: 53.6 seconds for VOA vs. 232.5 seconds for TED, indicating that there were not many differences in the length among the VOA talks.

Table 2. The lengths of 30 texts (TED and VOA) selected by Groups 1 and 2 (N=59)

| | Mean | SD | Max | Min |
|-----|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|-------------------|
| TED | 352 sec (5.9 min) | 232.5 sec (3.9 min) | 1105 sec (18.4 min) | 135 sec (2.3 min) |
| VOA | 247 sec (4.1 min) | 53.6 sec (0.9 min) | 487 sec (8.1 min) | 170 sec (2.8 min) |

Now the speech rate is compared between TED and VOA texts. To figure out an accurate speech rate of a talk, three speech rates (word per minute, wpm) of the same text were measured at the introduction, middle and end of each talk, which were then averaged. As shown in Table 3, the speech rates of TED talks are much faster than those of VOA: 167.9 wpm for TED vs. 117.0 wpm for VOA (t -test: $p <$

.01). However, it is natural considering that most speakers of the TED talks (chosen by the learners) were native speakers of English, and the speech is not modified or simplified for learners as in VOA.

Table 3. The speech rates (wpm) of 30 texts (TED and VOA) selected by Groups 1 and 2 (N=59)

| | Mean | SD | Max | Min |
|-----|-------|------|-----|-----|
| TED | 167.9 | 25.1 | 221 | 120 |
| VOA | 117.0 | 10.9 | 147 | 103 |

The distribution of speech rates (TED) is larger than that of VOA. VOA offers audio recordings that are controlled and similar in speaking speed.

The survey results

In the TED-talk assignments, the students were asked to rate the difficulty of the talks: the question was “Was the talk difficult to understand without subtitles?” On average, after combining the answers of all assignments, 59.2% (N=129) of the answers were “a little difficult”, and 31.7% (N=69) were “quite difficult.” No students answered that the talks were “not difficult.” For the intermediate-level learners, TED talks might be above their level.

At the end of the semester, a survey was conducted to understand the learners’ perception of EL practice. The students were asked if they had worked on EL exercises seriously. 86.7% of the learners reported “Yes, definitely” and “Yes.” In addition, 83.3% of the students said that they had enjoyed listening to TED talks, and 76.7% wanted to continue this EL practice after the semester was over (combined answers of “Yes, definitely” and “Yes”). Most of the students (90.0%) thought that listening to TED talks had helped improve their listening skills. These results show that the learners highly evaluated the EL practice using TED. All in all, the learners reported positive feedback.

In addition, there were open-ended questions to describe good and bad points of TED and VOA as EL materials (Tables 4 and 5). Some students provided two different answers, so the total answer numbers in the tables do not match the total number of the participants.

Table 4. The perception of TED talks by the learners (Groups 1 and 2, N=59)

| Good points | | N | % |
|-------------|--|----|-------|
| 1 | Ample contents, enjoyable learning | 31 | 39.7% |
| 2 | Subtitles help comprehension. | 18 | 23.1% |
| 3 | I can listen to native English, and improve my skills. | 14 | 18.0% |
| 4 | Videos help comprehension. | 7 | 9.0% |
| 5 | I can improve my presentation skills. | 5 | 6.4% |
| 6 | Easy to use | 3 | 3.9% |
| Bad points | | N | % |
| 1 | Talks are long. | 12 | 20.7% |
| 2 | Contents are difficult. | 9 | 15.5% |
| 3 | Speed is fast. | 8 | 13.8% |
| 4 | Problems with subtitles | 7 | 12.1% |
| 5 | I cannot enjoy learning. | 4 | 6.9% |
| 6 | Information is old. | 2 | 3.5% |
| 7 | Others | 3 | 5.2% |
| 8 | No answers | 13 | 22.4% |

Group 2 had the VOA listening training. Table 5 shows what Group 2 thought about the VOA materials. They tended to appreciate the quizzes that come at the end of each text (32.3%)¹. Although the students thought that the texts were easy to listen to (19.4%), some learners found them not so interesting (17.2%). The fact that there were no subtitles and no videos was perceived negatively by some students (34.5% and 17.2% respectively).

The participants' perception of TED and VOA tended to vary: both come with helpful and inconvenient features, which can differ in their effects on learners. That being the case, which do they prefer, authentic (TED) or modified material (VOA)? After experiencing listening to both types of materials, quite a large majority of students (Group 2, 72.4%, N=21) answered that they prefer TED over VOA.

Table 5. The perception of VOA talks by the learners (Group 2, N=29)

| Good points | | N | % |
|-------------|---|----|-------|
| 1 | There are quizzes. | 10 | 32.3% |
| 2 | Easy to listen and learn | 6 | 19.4% |
| 3 | Good contents | 6 | 19.4% |
| 4 | Slow speed | 5 | 16.1% |
| 5 | Short | 1 | 3.2% |
| 6 | No answers | 3 | 9.7% |
| Bad points | | N | % |
| 1 | No subtitles | 10 | 34.5% |
| 2 | No videos | 5 | 17.2% |
| 3 | Contents are not interesting. | 5 | 17.2% |
| 4 | Vocabulary and contents are difficult. | 3 | 10.3% |
| 5 | I don't think I can improve my listening. | 1 | 3.5% |
| 6 | No answers | 5 | 17.2% |

Discussion

Research question 1: How is EL using TED talks implemented by learners outside class?

On average, the participants listened to 20 TED talks in one semester, and they listened to one talk 3.6 times. The participants did repeated listening; they listened to a talk without subtitles at least once, and made use of the subtitles both in English and Japanese. Most learners perceived TED talks to be difficult. However, they thought that listening to TED talks helped improve their listening skills. The use of subtitles may have compensated for the difficulty especially in comprehension. By utilizing the subtitle options in English and Japanese, learners could improve their understanding of the contents and vocabulary, and increase their exposure to the contents in terms of listening input. The learners reported that the negative feature of VOA was that it had “No subtitles.” In listening to challenging materials such as TED, the use of subtitles can be a helpful scaffolding

practice that learners can rely on. However, if learners just read subtitles on the screen, they cannot improve their listening skills. It is important for teachers to stress that the goal is to be able to comprehend talks without subtitles.

Research question 2: How is EL practice perceived by learners in terms of difficulties, effectiveness, and motivation?

According to the survey results, TED talks were perceived to be difficult because of the length and level of the contents as well as because of the high speech rates: answers to this effect were given by 50% of the participants. However, the length, contents, and speed of TED talks vary greatly, and the students actually chose different talks. The average duration was 5.9 minutes, but one student might choose an 11-minute talk, while another would choose a 1:32-minute talk. The average speech rate of the TED talks (of the students' choice) was 167.9 wpm with a 25.1 standard deviation. DeZure, Kaplan, & Deerman (2001) claim that a speech rate of 135 wpm best supports students' lecture comprehension and note-taking. TED talks chosen by the learners include a wide range of speech rates: 135 to 221 wpm. Students with lower listening skills should avoid fast TED presenters especially at the beginning of EL training. Finding talks with appropriate length and speed is one of the integral strategies for both learners and teachers. Teachers can preselect suitable talks, though it might be more beneficial to let students freely choose talks they feel comfortable with.

One of the important criteria for extensive listening is whether students can enjoy the materials or not. If the practice is not enjoyable or interesting, continuous learning will be unlikely. As for the most frequent answer, about 40% of the participants answered that TED talks were enjoyable and offered ample contents. Since 76.7% of the students (Group 2) reported that they wanted to continue this EL practice, this study indicates that EL with TED can promote motivation for autonomous learning.

Research question 3: What are the benefits and limitations of EL (TED)?

Waring (2010) stresses that choosing the right materials is important, and it is not beneficial to listen to authentic English texts. The difficulties caused by

authenticity may potentially reduce the motivation to learn. However, if the text is interesting for learners, and the learners are motivated, challenging texts can advantageously be used. To reduce the learners' burden and promote continuous autonomy, it is important to choose the right online sites which provide helpful functions such as subtitles, and offer a wide variety of talks in terms of topics, length, visual effects, and speech rates. This study shows that TED talks can be one of the effective extensive listening materials. About three quarters of the students prefer TED over VOA. Authenticity of materials itself should not be an excluding factor in choosing effective extensive listening materials. Below are given some strategies to guide EL and to maximize the benefits.

Pedagogical Implications

Although the present study does not show any empirical results as to how much the learners improved their listening skills after the EL training, it might be reasonable to suggest that EL practice with TED talks can promote the development of listening skills and listening strategies to cope with authentic materials. TED talks may be too difficult for students at lower-intermediate levels and below. Even for students at higher levels, many TED talks are challenging. The following points are suggestions for teacher instructions.

(1) Student selection and speech rate

Students should select talks they like. When teachers are selecting talks, it is recommended to assign talks that are short and not too fast. Note that although a faster speech rate often tends to be problematic, a slower rate does not necessarily facilitate listening comprehension (Derwing & Munro, 2001; Zhao, 1997). The perception of speed varies among learners.

(2) Short talks and repeated listening

Students should be encouraged to find understandable and shorter talks that they can enjoy. They can select talks from the "0-6 minutes" category. (Go to "Watch" → "TED Talks" → "Duration" → "0-6 minutes.") It is effective to choose a short

talk and to repeat listening to it a few times. The appropriate frequency depends on learners' comprehension levels, available time, and motivation.

(3) Subtitles

Students can utilize the subtitle options, although relying on them too much should be avoided. The suggested order: (1) listen without subtitles → (2) listen with subtitles (English and/or native language) → (3) listen without subtitles

(4) Autonomous and continuous EL practice

As in the case of extensive reading, if students do not like a talk or feel that it is too hard, they should stop and choose a different talk. It is important for learners to enjoy listening to materials. The main purpose of this TED EL practice is to increase each student's exposure to English listening input. Continuity and autonomy of EL are key factors to succeed in improving learners' listening fluency.

The EL activity should be different from intensive listening. The learners should focus on comprehension of the main points, not details, and enjoy the listening activity. The TED listening training in the present study may be regarded as an alternative EL style because of the authentic challenging materials. Learners can develop strategies to deal with uncertainty and anxiety, to make educated guesses while listening, and to get accustomed to natural speech rates.

Conclusion

Extensive listening (EL) material should not be too difficult, so that the learner can comprehend and enjoy the contents. TED talks as EL materials, for intermediate-level learners of English, can be challenging. The participants (at intermediate levels) reported that the talks were long, the contents were difficult, and the speed was fast. However, the participants preferred the authentic challenging source (TED) to the modified easier source (VOA). The participants perceived that TED had helpful features such as interesting topics and visuals. TED provides helpful functions, for example, the options of English and foreign

language subtitles including Japanese. There is a rich variety of topics, length, and speech rates in TED talks viewed by the participants. If the learners acquire a strategy of choosing appropriate listening materials, TED can be one of the effective online EL sources. Most learners reported that listening to TED talks was enjoyable. The students were motivated to continue EL using TED, and they reported that their listening skills improved thanks to the EL practice. Future studies should investigate how learners actually improve their listening skills and fluency using objective measurements and larger samples.

Acknowledgement

This research was supported by the *Program for Supporting the Research Activities of Female Researchers* (MEXT) at Fukuoka Women's University and Research Encouragement Grant A from Fukuoka Women's University. The author would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments.

Note

- 1 The quiz section of VOA Learning English does not seem to be included at present. In addition, when the EL was implemented, there were not many videos available.

References

- Brown, S. (2011). *Listening Myths*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.
- Derwing, T., & Munro, M. (2001). What speaking rates do non-native listeners prefer? *Applied Linguistics*, 22(3), 324-337.
- DeZure, D., Kaplan, M., & Deerman, A. M. (2001). Research on student notetaking: Implications for faculty and graduate student instructors. *CRLT Occasional Papers*, 16, 1-7.
- Ducker, N. D., & Saunders, J. M. (2014). Extensive listening: Using authentic materials. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2013 Conference Proceedings* (pp. 383-394). Tokyo: JALT.
- Field, J. (2002). The changing face of listening. In J. C. Richards & W. A. Renandya (Eds.), *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice* (pp. 242-247). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Field, J. (2008). *Listening in the Language Classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Griffiths, R. (1992). Speech rate and listening comprehension: Further evidence of the relationship. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26(2), 385-390.
- Haginoya, E. (2013). Extensive listening and its benefits on EFL students. *Naomi Gakuen*

Daigaku Sougo Seisaku Ronshu, 16, 11-20.

- Renandya, W. A. (2012). Materials and methods for extensive listening. Plenary presentation—59th TEFLIN international conference. (November 6-8, 2012, Surabaya)
- Rosenhouse, J., Haik, L., & Kishon-Rabin, L. (2006). Speech perception in adverse listening conditions in Arabic-Hebrew bilinguals. *International Journal of Bilingualism*, 10(2), 119–135.
- Rost, M. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Listening*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Takaesu, A. (2013). Teaching practice. TED talks as an extensive listening resource for EAP students. *Language Education in Asia*, 4 (2), 150-162.
- Waring, R. (2010). Extensive listening. Rob Waring's Websites. Retrieved August 20, 2014, from <http://www.robwaring.org/el>
- Zhao, Y. (1997). The effects of listeners' control of speech rate on second language comprehension. *Applied Linguistics*, 18 (1), 49-68.

Appendix A
An example of a TED assignment

THIS WEEK'S TED TALK: The linguistic genius of babies

by Dr. Patricia Kuhl (Duration 10:18)

Please listen to the talk without any subtitles first. Then, listen to it again with subtitles (ENG or JPN), if you wish. It's good to listen to the talk without subtitles one more time in the end. After listening, write the report below.

Did you enjoy this talk? Not at all Not much A little A lot

Was this talk difficult to understand without subtitles?

Not difficult A little difficult Quite difficult Very difficult

How many times did you listen to this talk?

| | |
|--------------------|--------------|
| Without subtitles | times |
| With ENG subtitles | times |
| With JPN subtitles | times |
| TOTAL | times |

Briefly explain one thing that you agree with.

Briefly explain one thing that you disagree with.

Did you listen to other talks? Yes No How many? [] talks

If the answer is "yes," list one talk you listened to.

| | | |
|----------|--------------------|--------------|
| Speaker: | Without subtitles | times |
| Title: | With ENG subtitles | times |
| | With JPN subtitles | times |
| | TOTAL | times |