

# The Effect of *QuickListens* and Extensive Listening on EFL Listening Skill Development

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This study investigated the effects of *QuickListens* (Millet, 2010) in tandem with Extensive Listening assignments on listening skill and self-confidence development in university English majors over a term. The pedagogical approach employed in this study draws on meaning-focused input and fluency development aspects advocated in the four strands of teaching (Nation, 2007) and the results of Millet's study of the employment of the *QuickListens* approach (2010). Nation and Millet suggest that student listening skills and self-confidence improve when they listen extensively to easy texts that arouse their intrinsic interests. Thirty first-year English majors engaged in a *QuickListens* activity, listened to an easy and interesting story under time pressure during every class meeting, and were also required to listen to or watch self-selected materials for 30 minutes on a daily basis. The results show that the approach improved student listening skills as measured using a listening test and self-confidence as measured using a questionnaire.

The importance of Extensive Listening is obvious in language learning. L2 literature (e.g., Ellis, 1994) indicates that a large amount of exposure to input, whether visual or aural, is vital for language acquisition. This suggestion seems to be supported by researchers stressing the importance of quality input in language acquisition. Krashen (1985), advocating the Input Hypothesis, argues that humans acquire listening skills and language by understanding language that contains structures slightly beyond their current level of competence ( $i+1$ ): comprehensible input. He suggests that it is important for the learner to listen to a large amount of spoken English that is relatively easy. Easiness, in his opinion, is another key factor that helps the learner improve listening skills and language. Easiness and interest may be factors that determine whether the learner is actively involved in listening, or not. "Affect" (learner's motives, interests, needs, attitudes, or emotional states) thus functions as a filter that subconsciously screens incoming language, or input. Thus teachers should try to lessen learner anxiety about listening to English, and select input that best suits student motives and attitudes about listening. Krashen's suggestion supports the idea of Extensive Listening approaches that are usually employed based on materials learners want to listen to according to their interests and the levels of difficulty of the listening materials.

Drawing partially on Krashen's arguments, Nation (2007) proposed the four strands teaching approach in order to improve language skills

effectively. These are meaning-focused input, language-focused learning, meaning-focused output, and fluency development. He suggests that a language course, ideally, should have about 25 percent of each of these four strands. Different kinds of activities can be used within each component to promote language learning. He suggests that listening skills will improve when the learner engages in meaning-focused input and fluency development tasks that include Extensive Listening to easy and interesting materials. Extensive Listening must meet the following four assumptions of the meaning-focused input and fluency strands (Nation, 2007):

- (1) learners listen to what is largely familiar to them in terms of vocabulary, content, and discourse features,
- (2) learners focus on meaning (intrinsically interesting texts),
- (3) pressure is applied to the learners to perform at a higher than normal speed, and
- (4) learners are exposed to a large amount of input.

Closely examined, these assumptions (except the third) reflect suggestions made by Krashen in 1985.

Nation's four strands of teaching appear to support the use of an Extensive Listening approach to improve student listening skills and confidence in language learning.

Although there has been limited research on the effects of Extensive Listening, some studies indicate that story-telling has long been considered beneficial. For example, Elley and Magunbhai (1981) used "book flood" with primary school students and reported that

the abilities of the participants to understand sentence structures improved, as well as their reading and listening skills.

Support comes from literature on the use of listening strategies and self-regulation strategies in L2 learning. The use of Extensive Listening for listening skill development is congruent with strategies reported by successful English learners, especially those whose listening skills improved (Onoda, 2010; White, 2008). In these studies, various strategies were used to increase exposure to spoken language by having students talk to peers in and out of class, go to a self-access learning center, and listen to self-selected listening materials at home or while using public transportation. In addition, self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) explicate the effects of intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy on language skill development. Learners can regulate their learning when they are intrinsically motivated and self-efficacious. Self-regulated learning, in turn, effectively yielded enhanced academic achievement, which in turn, improved self-efficacy. The theoretical underpinning is corroborated by a large number of studies in educational psychology (e.g., Pintich & De Groot, 1990) and a few studies in second language acquisition (e.g., Onoda, 2010).

Extensive Listening can be corroborated by several studies to date that investigated the effects of Extensive Reading on language learning. Sheu (2003) showed that junior high school students in Taiwan improved their reading comprehension and speed. Lai (1993) provided evidence that high school students in Hong Kong improved reading comprehension and speed with Extensive Reading. Renandya, Rajan, and Jacobs (1999) showed that adult learners in Vietnam improved their general English proficiency. Davis (1995) commented that Extensive Reading made learners more positive about reading, and this implies enhanced motivation and confidence in L2 reading. More to the point, Harmer (2001) argued that Extensive Reading had a number of benefits for the development of language skills, and that the effects of Extensive Reading are echoed by the effects of Extensive Listening: “The more students listen, the more language they acquire, and the better they get at listening activities in general (p. 204).

Perhaps most importantly, Millet’s teaching technique utilizing the *QuickListen* approach

(2010) lends strong support to Extensive Listening. *QuickListens* includes short and focused listening exercises utilizing graded readers supplemented with a CD. The activity was designed to enhance students’ intrinsic motivation, to provide repeated exposure to high frequency vocabulary and grammar, and to improve student listening skills. The activity is important for meaning-focused input and fluency development, which are two of Nation’s four stands of teaching. This activity also helps learners gain confidence in using and listening to English and listening by putting into practice what they already know (Millet, 2010). Her teaching approach, which encourages students to listen to easy and interesting stories over the course of a year, enhances both listening skills and self-confidence. The results are congruent with the results of a number of studies on Extensive Reading (Day, 2008).

#### Research question

Drawing on suggestions by Krashen and Nation, results of studies that support Extensive Reading, and Millet’s pedagogical approach, a large amount of exposure to listening material that is easy and interesting is expected to improve the listening skills of participants who have been exposed to limited amounts of spoken English. This line of thought leads to the following research question.

To what extent is the use of *QuickListens*, in tandem with daily Extensive Listening assignments, effective for listening skill development in university English majors over the course of one term?

#### Participants

The participants were 30 first-year English majors at a university in eastern Japan in 2009 and 2011. Participants demonstrated an intermediate English proficiency as measured by TOEFL. The 2009 group (the control group) was composed of 24 female and 6 male students, and the 2011 group (the experimental group) comprised 23 female and 7 male students. There were no statistically significant differences between the two groups in terms of listening skills as measured by a listening comprehension test, and listening and reading skills as measured by TOEFL at the beginning of April in 2009 and 2011.

#### Research Design

At the onset of the study at the beginning of the first term, it was confirmed that there were no significant differences between the two groups, in

terms of listening skills as measured by a listening comprehension test composed of 50 questions (monologues and dialogues) lasting for 40 minutes ( $\alpha = .82$ ), and reading and listening skills as measured by TOEFL. After that, listening skills improvements were compared between the two groups using a listening comprehension test at the end of the term. At the beginning and end of the term, confidence in L2 listening was also measured using a questionnaire, and interviews were conducted in order to elicit feelings about the two tasks in which the experimental group had engaged.

During the term, the control group (2009) engaged in a news-clip listening task, in addition to other classroom tasks, which are described below. These other tasks were similar in both the control and experimental classrooms. TV news clips were taken from VOA (Voice of America) news programs. The participants were required to answer questions in the TOEFL practice book as assignments. The experimental group (2011) engaged in a *QuickListens* activity (Millet, 2010) using *Tales from Arabian Nights* during every class meeting, in addition to other classroom tasks. The participants were required to complete daily Extensive Listening assignments and hand in their completed listening diaries. For Extensive Listening, two principles were adopted from Day and Bamford's (2002) ten principles for Extensive Reading: (1) easy and interesting listening material, and (2) participants are required to select material to listen to or watch for at least 30 minutes every day, except weekends. Other classroom materials, for both the control and experimental groups, included a TOEFL listening/reading practice book, an Academic Word List quiz (both language-focused learning activities), and a 4/3/2 story-telling task for fluency development.

### Results

Listening skills, as demonstrated in the listening comprehension test by both the control group and experimental group, were analyzed using t-tests. It was found that the mean of the experimental group ( $M = 64.56$ ,  $SD = 10.84$ ) was significantly different from the mean of the control group ( $M = 57.56$ ,  $SD = 10.14$ ),  $t(29) = -3.86$ ,  $p < .001$ . In addition, results from the questionnaire administered to both groups in April and July indicated that confidence in L2 listening appeared to increase in the experimental group, but not in the control group. On a five-point Likert scale (1 = not at all confident in listening to English to 5 =

very confident in listening to English), confidence in L2 learning did not improve in the control group (3.1 in April and 3.2 in July in 2009) as much as in the experimental group (3.2 in April, and 3.7 in July of 2011).

### Discussion

Results show that the effects of this pedagogical approach helped improve listening skills significantly more than the news-clip listening task (language-focused learning). Student feedback may help clarify the reasons. Eight students in the experimental group commented that using the TOEFL practice book (language-focused learning) and the *QuickListens* activity (meaning-focused input) were well balanced. The TOEFL practice book was a little difficult, and the students had to listen very attentively. However, the students were relaxed and could easily follow the storyline when engaged in the *QuickListens* activity. Their comments appear to reflect one of the benefits of the four stands of teaching (2007). The teaching approach also seemed to be motivationally effective as well. Participant comments provided information about the effects of the teaching style. Fourteen students in the experimental group discussed the value of the combination of the *QuickListens* activity with Extensive Listening and supported the benefits of that activity and assignment. They reported that they had a lot of fun in understanding the story aurally. More importantly, Extensive Listening alone appears to be effective for students. Three students went so far as to say that after they began Extensive Listening, they felt some of the English sentences echoing in their head. Seventeen students reported that they learned useful words and expressions for speaking. More importantly, eight students reported improvement of their listening skills and appeared to have expanded their English world, enhancing their confidence in L2 listening. Eight students found and utilized various listening strategies such as watching a DVD without subtitles first and then watching it with subtitles to try to understand what they did not understand without the subtitles. They followed this by discussing what they did not understand with their friends or teachers. The 4/3/2 story telling task was useful and well connected to Extensive Listening. Twelve students described the stories they listened to or watched in the Extensive Listening assignment. Thus, the *Quicklistens* activity seemed to be complementary to the Extensive Listening task

(fluency-development) and well-integrated in class tasks, which included AWL list vocabulary quizzes (language-focused learning), as well as the 4/3/2 story telling task (fluency development).

Improvement of listening skills appears to be linked to that of confidence in L2 listening. Seven students reported that by engaging in the *QuickListens* activity and Extensive Listening, they regained confidence that they had lost while studying the TOEFL textbook. Their comments seem to be congruent with the Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) in that input should be easy, interesting, and valuable to learners. The *QuickListens* activity and Extensive Listening assignments drew on familiar and interesting topics that provided good impetus for learners and helped the students maintain a positive self-image (Williams & Burden, 2005).

The results are also supported by self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), as well, that postulate that intrinsic motivation and self-efficacy have a deep impact on academic achievement. They imply that improved self-efficacy appears to be related to improved listening skills (Onoda, 2010; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990).

This teacher-initiated approach using *QuickListens*, in tandem with Extensive Listening, is thus legitimized and expected to yield positive results on L2 listening development.

### Conclusion

The use of *QuickListens*, in tandem with Extensive Listening assignments, appears to be effective in improving the listening skills, self-confidence, and motivation for L2 learning by university English majors. However, given the small sample size ( $n = 30$ ), some caution should be exercised in interpretation of the results. Future replication with a larger sample size may provide more substantial verification of these findings. Furthermore, it may be necessary to monitor the completion of Extensive Listening assignments more closely with methods more rigorous than student reports and interviews.

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