

Investigating Extensive Listening Using Graded Reader CDs

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This paper investigates the benefits of extensive listening. Students from three university classes were followed over a year and a half. Pre- and post-tests were used to assess improvements in listening ability, and students also completed surveys regarding their feelings about graded readers and about how much extensive listening they had done. In addition, eight students were selected for in-depth interviews about these issues. Results show that student listening test scores have a slight connection with both the number of graded reader CDs listened to and the amount of time spent listening. Students also perceive the value of using the graded reader CDs for improving their English. Finally, students are truly interested in interacting with each other, which teachers can use in designing classroom activities using graded readers with CDs.

This research project followed students' use of Graded Readers with CDs (GR-CDs) for listening and shadowing over the course of three semesters: from April 2010 through July 2011. The study's participants were 90 students from three advanced level sections. During the three semesters, the students were enrolled in required English classes. Extensive listening instruction was incorporated into these courses. However, in some classes, the extensive listening activities were left to students as homework. This study includes both quantitative and qualitative research guided by differing but complementary research questions. The quantitative study used pre- and end-of-semester listening tests and surveys. The surveys contained questions about students' attitudes towards English and about doing listening and shadowing activities. The qualitative study, conducted following the second semester, employed interviews with eight students.

Analysis of Quantitative Data

The quantitative part of the study investigated the effectiveness of the extensive listening activities for improving students' listening ability, according to both test scores and students' perceptions of their own abilities. The surveys also provide insight into the English study activities that students consider the most useful.

Research Questions

The guiding questions for this section are: (1) Did student listening improve and (2) What accounted for that improvement? An additional question is (3) Why did some students not improve?

Methodology

This study used a listening test, given when students started their classes in May 2010 and then again in July 2011. The test included a variety of genres, from conversations and speeches to fiction and nonfiction narratives. Score gains between these tests were calculated. Students also completed surveys at the beginning and end of each semester to gauge their perceptions about extensive listening and to find out how much extensive listening they actually did. The study has full listening-test data for 50 students and both listening test and survey data for 23 students.

Student Improvement

On average, student listening scores improved by 8.6 points (26%) between May 2010 and July 2011, as shown in Table 1 (below). Table 1 gives the correlation between the number of GR-CDs students listened to (an average of 9.8 and a maximum of 21) and students' change in listening test scores. Students reported spending an average of 2.9 hours (and a maximum of 7) listening to GR-CDs. There was little correlation between students' reported reading (an average of 20 books and a maximum of 36) and their change in listening test scores.

Table 1. Correlation between Listening Test Scores with GR Listening and Reading (n=23)

	Improvement on Listening Test	# GR-CDs Listened to	# Hours Spent Listening	# Books Read
Maximum	17	21	7	36
Average	8.6	9.8	2.9	20.9
Median	9.0	8.0	2.8	20.0
Minimum	1	2	1	11
Standard Deviation	4.6	5.4	1.6	6.2
Correlation with Change in Test Scores		0.217	0.197	0.026

Table 2. Activities that Helped Students Improve their English Skills (% of Total Activities)

	Most Helpful Activities (n=35)	Other Helpful Activities (n=39)	Totals: All Helpful Activities (n=74)
Listening to GR-CDs	23%	15%	19%
Reading GRs	20%	21%	20%
Writing a lot	17%	10%	14%
Learning Textbook Materials	14%	15%	15%
Pair Work	11%	5%	8%
Shadowing GR-CDs	6%	13%	9%
Presentations		10%	5%
Discussions		10%	5%
Others	9%		4%

Student Perception of the Benefits of Graded Reader Activities

Students want to improve their English skills. For 97% of the students (n=69), improving their English was either important or very important. During the study, 53% reported that their English really had improved. For students who said their English skills improved, we asked which activities were the most useful. (Students could give one or more reasons.) Graded reader activities were chosen as the primary or secondary reason for their improved ability 49% of the time. More specifically, as shown in Table 2, students said they improved because they read graded readers (20%), listened to GR-CDs (19%), and shadowed (9%). Further, 78% of students felt that the graded readers helped them build their vocabulary. Listening to GR-CDs was considered good listening practice by 96%, and more than 90% of students thought shadowing was useful for building various English skills.

For the students who felt their English had not improved, the main reasons were that they did not study much (53%) or did not do the extensive listening activities (35%).

This data indicates that students perceive the value of extensive listening, but most students are not doing much. Their activities cannot be called "extensive" because they did so little. Efforts to promote extensive listening should prove beneficial.

Qualitative Research

To gain deeper insight into the reasons behind student improvements, we analyzed student comments and conducted interviews so that we could include

students' actual voices and perspectives on listening to and shadowing GR-CDs.

Research Questions

The guiding research questions of our qualitative study were: During one year of graded reader activities, (1) What have you realized about your strengths in English? and (2) What have you realized about your weaknesses in English?

Methodology

At the end of the 2010 school year, we asked the 58 students involved in our study to respond to survey questions. Later, we selected eight students to interview from the respondents who were willing to be interviewed. Data analysis of the comments mainly involved inductive reasoning. To strengthen the "trustworthiness" of our qualitative data, Yonezawa and Kurihara collaboratively coded students' comments. First they were individually coded, and then the results were compared and combined.

Qualitative Findings

Results from Students' Written Comments.

Out of 58 students, 50 responded to the survey. Regarding students' perceptions of their strengths in English, 14 students (28%) reported that their reading speed improved. Thirteen students (26%) also commented that their listening skills were better. However, they reported that certain language skills were limited. For example, 11 students (22%) wrote that they have limited vocabulary. Eight students (16%) also believe that their speaking skills were weak. These findings indicate that students have

mixed feelings about the influence of GR-CDs on their English skills.

Interviewed Students' Backgrounds

Of the 8 interview participants, two are international students (from Mongolia [Z] and China [I]). The rest [D, F, K, M, T, & Y] are Japanese.

Students' English Strengths

The interviewees believe that reading, listening to, and shadowing GR-CDs helped improve their general English abilities and changed their attitude towards learning English, especially in terms of (1) speaking skills, (2) realizing the differences between their spoken English and the English they heard on the CDs, (3) increasing their self-confidence, and (4) increasing their interest in English.

First, five students reported that their speaking skills improved. For example, M commented, *"I came to have little hesitation speaking English. Everybody in class tries to speak English."* Z also mentioned, *"I think (shadowing) helps speaking... probably because I can [better] control what I'm saying... You'll notice that you made mistakes [about the usage of specific words], and you are trying to be careful about your mistakes for the next time."*

In addition, all participants noticed differences between the English heard on the GR-CDs and their spoken English. All of them struggled with shadowing because of the fast narration. Even K and M, who had both studied overseas, said they could not keep up with the speed of GR-CDs. Three students noticed that there was a gap between their English pronunciation and intonation while shadowing and the English as read by GR narrators. For example, T commented, *"You'll become aware of differences when you do shadowing and listen to your own English. The barrier preventing me from reaching their level is enormous.... I wish I could imitate their English."*

In addition, three students indicated that they developed self-confidence in their own English abilities. For instance, M commented, *"I've never dreamt that I would be able to read English books.... I read a GR, even a thin one, and I thought, Wow, I can read an English book. I had a [new] sort of confidence.... The barrier to reading an English book has disappeared."*

Students' English Weaknesses

Through the GR-CDs activities and shadowing, eight interviewees noticed their weaknesses in the four English skills as well as in grammar and vocabulary. One participant expressed concern about grammar.

F said, *"My English knowledge such as the grammar [understanding] I gained in my high school years is decreasing.... I have a sense of crisis about my English knowledge now."*

This participant also did not appreciate the benefits of shadowing, saying, *"I've improved my shadowing..., but I don't feel it [the merit from my improved shadowing]."* When asked how she did shadowing, she said that she shadowed texts that she sometimes didn't understand. Clearly, this is the wrong way to practice shadowing. Like a parrot, she could imitate the pronunciation and intonation of a GR-CD and felt she had improved in this ability. However, because she did not understand what she was shadowing, she did not feel shadowing benefited her very much. Her negative comment about shadowing contrasts with that of participant M who said, *"It's meaningless to do shadowing without comprehending the text that you are shadowing."*

Some participants noticed that they had limited vocabulary, which was usually revealed while they were speaking English. Participant Y expressed frustration with his restricted vocabulary, saying: *"In my high school years, ... I think I studied it [vocabulary] quite hard. But, when I had a chance to actually use it, I could not make use of it.... My vocabulary knowledge has been increasing, but I cannot incorporate it into an actual conversation."*

Pair and Group Work

Students value pair and group work much more than we expected. It is very likely that these activities help increase their motivation to learn English. The interviewees expressed interest in their peers' English proficiency and thoughts. M said, *"When my conversation partner said that he wanted to become a scholar (in English), I felt impressed and found it very interesting.... Because we try to communicate in English, which we are not so good at, we end up making a lot of effort to listen to others. I think that is good."* Another comment is from K, *"My speaking partner kept talking to me in English.... That attitude helped me learn English."* These comments show that students want to feel connected to others. Thus, teachers should use students' desire to connect to others to motivate students' extensive reading, listening, and shadowing.

Our Study's Implications

Shadowing with GR-CDs. We have learned from our students' written comments and interviews that

listening to GR-CDs and doing shadowing has the potential to help improve students' English. These activities enable students to become more aware of different aspects of their English skills.

The positive results from these activities can be achieved by using them in class. (1) Some reading, listening, and shadowing should to be done during class. (2) Beneficial reading and shadowing need the instructor's guidance and care.

To benefit from listening to GR-CDs and shadowing, students should do these activities in class, even though it seems to be an irrational use of class time. While these activities can and should be done individually outside of class, many (if not most) students do not spend time on these activities at home. More importantly, since students want to feel connected with others, a good way to do this is to have them share their reading and shadowing.

In addition, we should not leave these activities only in students' hands. Teachers should guide pair or group work, observing students closely to see how well they are doing. That way, teachers can offer advice and modify their instructions. One easily implemented idea for pair work is to have "Student A" read a GR while "Student B" shadows "Student A." Alternately, pairs of students could read the same book, talk about it, and then present information about the book in class. Another idea is requiring students to record their shadowing (using a digital voice recorder or PC) and submit it to their instructor. One teacher required her students to do this twice during the semester. She found it raised students' commitment to this activity. However, it is important to keep reminding students that they should comprehend the text they are shadowing. Otherwise, some students might improve their ability to shadow but not their communicative English skills.

Conclusions

The benefits of extensive reading have been discussed in many papers, but few have discussed extensive listening, as this study does. Our data shows a slight connection between listening to GR-CDs and improved listening skills. This connection would probably have been stronger if students had truly done extensive listening. All of our survey data indicates that extensive listening activities are some of the most helpful activities students can do to improve their English. Our qualitative data confirms the

usefulness of having students listen to and shadow GR-CDs. Students' written comments and our 2011's interviews confirm that these activities are beneficial when done correctly. Having students listen to and shadow GR-CDs increases their awareness of their own English skills, while related pair and group work raises their motivation.