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Extensive Listening Practice and Input Enhancement Using Mobile Phones: Encouraging Out-of-Class Learning with Mobile Phones

Platform	Mobile phone or other mobile device capable of playing mp3 files
Other software and hardware used	Audacity sound editing software and a computer capable of running it

Introduction

The use of mobile phones and other mobile devices for educational purposes has received increasing attention in recent years (Chinnery, 2006). Teachers and materials designers are starting to explore the potential of ubiquitous, relatively cheap and increasingly powerful devices as potential supports for learning and teaching. This is partly in response to learner expectations: already in 2003 a study (Thornton & Houser, 2003) found that young Japanese learners preferred to use their cellphone for almost everything, from emailing to reading books and this trend has continued, also outside Japan. A recent study in Taiwan showed that language learners enjoyed learning with their mobile phones, largely because they could learn when and where they wanted but also, interestingly, because they felt that the ‘bite-sized chunks’ of learning content (due to limitations such as screen size) were actually helpful to them in managing their learning (Chen, Hsieh, & Kinshuk, 2008). There are other potential pedagogical advantages too. Mobile phones are taken everywhere and can therefore support *situated learning*. For example, a second language speaker who needs to see a doctor could access relevant vocabulary and expressions while actually at the clinic. Situated learning theory holds that learning is more likely to take place when the information is contextually relevant to the learner and when it can be put to use immediately (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Related to this is the obvious fact that phones are social tools; they facilitate all forms of communication and collaboration between peers. In this way they support social and constructive activities, as supported by sociocultural theories of learning.

Another advantage of mobile devices is that they can help minimize the separation between the classroom and the out-of-school environment (Reinders & Lewis 2009). Applied linguists agree on little when it comes to theories for explaining language learning but one thing seems clear; more exposure to the target language and more practice (“time on task”) generally

explain most of the variation in students' success. Any tool then that can help increase students' access to the language will be helpful for long-term success.

In Korea, as in most EFL settings, many students do not seem to take up opportunities for practice such as those afforded by the internet, TV, or magazines and there is a general reluctance to seek out ways of engaging with the English language outside the classroom. We were keen to encourage our learners to feel comfortable with exposure to English and to feel in control of their independent learning experience. Using mobile phones to give students access to English, in particular for extensive listening practice, seemed a logical choice.

Extensive Listening through Audiobooks

Extensive listening is in many ways similar to extensive reading; students primarily focus on *meaning* rather than *form*, and are exposed to texts for relatively long stretches at a time. The purpose is to provide students with as much target language input as possible. Extensive listening has been shown to have considerable benefits for vocabulary development, accent recognition, and also students' productive skills, in particular pronunciation and speaking (cf. Renandya & Farrell, 2010). There are also benefits to developing motivation. Many students report great satisfaction when they are first able to understand a news broadcast or a TV program, for example (Ryan, 1998). However, extensive listening practice is difficult to do in class for practical reasons, and the classroom may not be the best place if the aim is to get students into the *habit* of engaging with the language on their own and to encourage them to take ownership of their practice. It is therefore important to find ways for students to listen to music, presentations, radio programmes, or other spoken text, as frequently as possible.

One type of spoken text that has become very popular in recent years is the audiobook. These are books that are read out loud, usually by professional speakers. There are both abridged and unabridged books, and there are also many graded readers that come with cassettes or CD. They have the obvious advantage that they encourage students to listen for meaning over extended periods of time, and therefore have the same benefits that extensive reading of printed books brings. Books can be bought from vendors (<http://audible.com> is the most popular site for authentic materials and most publishers that sell graded readers also have audiobooks available), but there is also an increasing number of sites that offer free audiobooks, notably Project Gutenberg (<http://www.gutenberg.org>). Thousands of different titles are offered in audiobook format, both fiction and non-fiction, recent popular books and classics. It is therefore relatively easy to find titles that are interesting to learners, or relevant in the context of a particular course.

Input Enhancement

As important as it is to encourage extensive listening and listening for meaning, previous research has shown that drawing learners' attention to more formal aspects of the language, such as a certain grammar point, in an otherwise meaning-oriented activity (such as a classroom activity, or when reading a book), can help learners to remember the grammar point better (see Norris & Ortega, 2000). We were therefore interested in encouraging our learners to pay attention to both form and meaning without interrupting their listening, for example, by giving them specific grammar instruction. One way to do this is through input enhancement. This is a technique that simply involves manipulating the L2 input in some way that makes it more likely that learners will notice certain parts of it. For example, in a written

text, each occurrence of the past perfect could be underlined, or each indefinite article bolded. There are many studies of input enhancement that show that it has the potential to get learners to pay attention to form while keeping their main focus on the meaning of the input.

Input enhancement is almost always done with written text. In our case we used it for listening by digitally manipulating the audiobook and by slightly raising the volume of each occurrence of the passive and adverb placement in the book. Below we describe how we did this.

How We Did It

Participants in this project were 68 freshman students enrolled in a business administration program at a university in Korea. All of them were taking a compulsory course in “Academic English for Business Majors,” which focuses on the development of communicative skills. Most of the students in the class were at the intermediate level. Their main areas of weakness were in listening and speaking.

Step 1—Selection of the listening materials

We chose listening materials based on the level of the recording and the interests of our students. Extensive listening is quite demanding as learners cannot (or at least are not supposed to) control the speed of the recording, nor go back to a previous section. Also, for most of our Korean learners, listening to an entire book would be a new experience. Our priority was thus to select a title that was somewhat challenging but easy enough to encourage learners to persist in and enjoy listening to it. After examining vocabulary levels, average sentence complexity, and book length, we selected a popular business title called *Peaks and valleys* by Spencer Johnson (2009), a relatively short book about how to successfully manage the ups and downs in one’s life. The text itself consists mainly of conversations rather than lengthy narrative sections, and it is only one and a half hours long. This seemed ideal for our purposes.

It is also important to note that we obtained the publisher’s (Pearson Education) express written permission to use this copyrighted work for the purposes of this study.

Step 2—Identifying target grammar structures

Once we had selected the book we decided on two grammatical structures that we wanted to highlight. We decided on adverb placement and passives because we knew these to be somewhat familiar to our students, but not fully developed. Also, we knew these grammar points had not been covered in the students’ university English courses. As for adverb placement, we were interested in students noticing and learning the correct word order (SAVO, as opposed to *SVAO):

The rain had completely washed away the path.

*The rain had washed away completely the path

Most students are aware of passives but because of a lack of exposure to authentic input, are not familiar with recognising them in longer stretches of text, or in spoken contexts. We were interested in the students noticing and learning the difference between:

The young man was exhausted by the events of the week.

*The young man exhausted by the events of the week.

There were a total of 65 instances of adverb placement and 55 passives in the text.

Step 3—Digital input enhancement

Next, we had to make these grammatical features stand out from the surrounding text in some way. We decided to artificially increase the volume of each occurrence of our target structures by about 20%. This made the target items noticeably louder but not so much so that it would interrupt their listening experience.

We transferred the audio CDs to a computer and converted them to mp3 files using the free sound manipulation program called Audacity (<http://audacity.sourceforge.net/download/>), and we also used this program to raise the volume of the target items.

Step 4—Transferring the listening materials to students' phones

We uploaded the mp3 files to the university's course management system and asked students to download the materials to their mobile phones. Since the ability to download and play mp3 files is now a standard feature of mobile phones, this process was straightforward and trouble-free. For language teachers who do not have access to an institutional course management system, a free alternative is Moodle (<http://moodle.com>), or free web services such as Google apps for education.

Step 5—Instructions to the students

Extensive listening is not familiar practice for most EFL learners, certainly not in Korea, so it was important for us to explain to students what the purpose and benefits of the exercise were. We told students to “simply enjoy the story” and not to worry about understanding every word or expression, and to “just keep listening.” We told them not to use dictionaries or grammar books, but to listen to the story as they would listen to a story in Korean. We also told them not to listen to the book more than once or to rewind while listening. To help them get started we gave them some background information about the story and some information about the author. We told students that the book would be discussed in class and that therefore everyone had to listen to it. We gave students one week to complete the book. They were also told that the book would be talked about in class and that they would be asked about the content of the book on their final exam. We did not tell them about the grammar points we had enhanced. These grammar points were not covered in class in that week (or in the weeks prior).

How Did It Go?

One important goal for us was to motivate students to engage in extensive listening and to give them more exposure to English outside the classroom. In this we were generally successful. Most students were enthusiastic about using their mobile phones for learning and were excited about being given practice materials that they could use in their own time and outside the classroom. Some students specifically mentioned that they did not feel the same pressure as they often experienced in class, or the same expectations as with ‘regular’ homework. The fact that they were told to simply listen to the story and did not have to memorise vocabulary or study the content for a test increased their enjoyment. Others said that it was an exciting experience, and they liked that they could easily access English

materials while waiting for friends or travelling on the bus; time that would otherwise have been lost. Students also liked having materials available to them on their mobile phones, as they carry these with them at all times and are able to control when and for how long to listen to the materials. As a result, we suspect that this type of activity can have longer-term positive benefits, both by increasing the chances of students accessing English materials, and also by lowering students' affective filter and increasing their motivation.

Not all students were positive, though. Some said that they found the changes in volume distracting and one student even thought there was a technical problem with the recording. Unlike more common forms of input enhancement, such as bolding or underlining, perhaps students need to be told to pay attention to those parts of the text that are louder than others.

Our second purpose was to encourage students to focus not only on meaning but also on form, in our case adverb placement and passives. Our intention was to investigate empirically whether they had noticed and acquired these features simply by listening to the story. However, we encountered several problems. Firstly, it was clear that some students had in fact listened to the book more than once. Although we were pleased with their enthusiasm, this did make it impossible to make comparisons between students, especially since it became clear that some students had not completed the entire recording. This meant that they had not received the same amount of exposure as other students. Finally, some students had already read the book in either Korean or in English before, making it difficult to determine the effect of listening to the book. As a result, we are unable at this point to say whether the input enhancement had any effect. We intend to conduct a more controlled study in the next course.

Lessons Learned

The use of mobile phones for extensive listening practice seems to hold promise, as does the use of input enhancement in spoken texts. However, there are some points to keep in mind when considering the use of either the tool or the technique. In our first attempt at using audiobooks we made a number of mistakes, the most important of which was that we did not link the listening activity closely enough with what happened in class. Therefore, some students did not complete the task of listening to the books. Perhaps they saw the activity as less important, because it was not clearly tied in with the rest of the curriculum. It is important to treat, at least initially, the listening activity as any other type of learning task: It requires clear instructions, a purpose, and a feedback mechanism. Students will need to understand what the purpose of the activity is (sometimes students stop and look up every word they do not know) and perhaps show them some strategies for extensive listening first. Teachers could ask students to do something after listening to the book, such as post a review on a publisher's website, or (if their writing skills are not yet advanced), a rating on a site like Amazon. You could build on the story in class and ask students to tell each other what they thought of it. Most importantly, students probably will need to feel that they are supported in some way. This also applied to the use of input enhancement; without instruction about, or at least familiarity with, the use of volume to make certain grammar points stand out in the spoken text, some students were confused, or even distracted.

There are some other potential downsides to using mobile technology. Although this does not apply in Korea, in many countries not everyone has a mobile phone and even where students do, they may not want to use it for school purposes. It is important to consider issues of access

to the technology, ease of use and privacy before requiring students to use their phones for educational purposes.

Conclusion: Using Mobile Phones for Language Teaching

Activities such as the one we outlined above are based on research in second language acquisition and, we believe, are pedagogically sound, but have the added benefit of using a tool that our learners are intimately familiar with. Mobile technology has real potential to extend learning opportunities outside the classroom and give learners more control. In the next course we aim to create more extensive activities around books. We also aim to investigate empirically the effects of the extensive listening and the input enhancement techniques, and to study other types of input enhancement, such as the inclusion of short pauses before and after certain grammar points. For now, we are excited about the possibility of mobile learning and plan to include it in our teaching more often. Based on our first experiences, we are convinced our students will appreciate this.

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