

BLENDED LEARNING IN ESP LISTENING

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Abstract

For a long time researchers and language practitioners have maintained that listening skills could be picked up by the learners. By now it has been generally accepted that listening skills have to be taught like any other language skills. The current advantages of high-technology allow employing the method blended learning of listening skills in English classrooms. This article examines the practice of blended learning in the sense of its classic definition, look at some online activities teachers can select, and present some evidence of a its positive contribution to the difficult task of second language acquisition for communication.

Key words: blended learning of listening skills, English for Specific Purposes, statistical processing by a means of Statistical Package for Social Sciences.

Introduction

Listening skills in language learning have not received sufficient attention although forty percent of daily communication is spent on listening. Moreover, listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning. Hardly anyone doubts nowadays that listening skills must be trained regularly. The current application of high-technology in language education is listening online which can also be combined with traditional classroom listening to cassettes or CDs. This article describes the practice of blended listening in the ESP classrooms and analyzes students' attitudes to its usefulness.

Literature review

In the world of education, three definitions of “blended learning” are relevant (Sharma, 2010:456). The classic definition of the term is “the integrated combination of traditional learning with web based online approaches (Oliver and Trigwell 2005:17). Here, ‘traditional learning’ is classroom face-to-face language classes. Two other definitions refer to either a combination of technologies or a combination of methodologies (Sharma, 2010:456).

Listening skills in language learning have not received sufficient attention by researchers and shifted to a secondary position. The priority has been given to teaching speaking and writing. It is a surprising fact considering that it is the skill most often used in everyday life. According to L. Miller (2003), more than forty percent of our daily communication is spent on listening, thirty-five percent on speaking, about sixteen percent on reading, and only nine percent on writing. Yet listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning in spite of its crucial role in communication and language acquisition.

The Internet offers a variety of ways for language learners to engage in communicative activities. Due to increased opportunities apart from reading and writing online speaking and listening activities can be included (Chinnery, 2010). The use of computers in the foreign language classroom has greatly influenced how teachers teach and students learn, and continuing advances in the Internet technology will most likely continue to affect the profession of teaching languages. In order to make online teaching successful, some conditions must be satisfied, such as opportunities for learners to interact and negotiate meaning, interact in the target language, be involved in authentic tasks, work in a friendly environment without stress or anxiety, and teachers have to provide feedback to learners on their success and achievements (Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith, 1999:4). By applying these principles to online speaking and listening communication activities, the new technologies have become optimal tools for enhancing students' second language learning and acquisition.

Many learners, especially at low proficiency levels in the language, find that listening is the most difficult skill of English. Listening involves not only correctly interpreting incoming speech but also responding appropriately to the speaker, especially in face-to-face conversations where listeners must be able to contribute verbally (Farrell and Mallard, 2006). Instead of hoping that students will eventually develop their listening skills by themselves, teachers should consider the reasons why students have difficulty comprehending listening input. There are several reasons why spoken text might be difficult to follow. Learners often perceive a text spoken at normal or even at a slow speed as being very or even too fast. According to research by Farrell and Mallard (2006), the reason is that speech rate is correlated with comprehension success. Learners' inability to understand the second language speech is caused just as much by difficulties of the language as by memory limits (Cook, 1996:69). All comprehension depends on the storing and processing of information by the mind. The point is that the human mind is less efficient in the second language whatever it is doing. Second language learners have cognitive deficits with listening that are not caused by lack of language ability but by difficulties with processing information in this language (Cook, 1996). For many learners, the critical level, i.e. the level of speech rate above which comprehension becomes impossible, is normally much lower than that for the more advanced learners. Another reason is phonological changes that occur in speech of native speakers such as dropping or adding sounds. This makes it difficult to recognize 'modified' words. Moreover, word boundaries are blurry which also adds to the processing difficulties. Furthermore, speech has to be processed in real time as learners have no control over the speaker's words or speed and unable to hear it repeated. According to Y. Zeng (2007, unpublished dissertation, quoted by Renandya and Farrell (2011:53)), Chinese students believe that speech rate is the most important source of their listening problems. Willy A. Renandya and Thomas S.C. Farrell (2011:55) suggest that listening strategies must be taught. Moreover, practicing extensive listening might be beneficial. By extensive listening they mean all types of listening activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input. Such activities can be teacher-directed dictations or listening practice in the classroom or self-directed listening for pleasure. It goes without saying that listening is best learnt through listening. Likewise, J. Field (2003) and M. Wilson (2003) argued that teaching higher level cognitive and metacognitive strategies, e.g. inferencing and self-monitoring strategies, will solve students' listening problems.

Teaching listening skills is one of the most difficult tasks for any English language teacher, because successful listening skills are acquired over time and with lots of practice (Rivers, 1992:32). Learning listening skills is frustrating for students because there are no rules as in grammar teaching. Listening skills are also difficult to quantify. One of the largest inhibitors for students is often mental block. While listening students suddenly decide they do not understand. At this point, many students just tune out. Some students convince themselves they are unable to understand spoken English well and create problems for themselves (Rivers, 1992:70). In order to help students to improve listening skills, a scientific approach is essential. One aspect of this approach is to convince learners that not understanding is all right. Another aspect is to satisfy the students wish to listen to English passages as often as possible. The third aspect is to provide listening practice for short periods of time, from 5 to 10 minutes. The fourth aspect of this approach is to teach students important listening strategies, which are individual - not the same to each person, i.e. take notes, to pay attention, not to stop listening or get distracted or bored if not understanding. Useful listening sub-skills incorporate predicting, guessing unknown words or phrases, identifying and retaining points, retaining relevant points, recognizing discourse markers, cohesive devices, understanding different intonation patterns and uses of stress, understanding inferred information.

It is well known that communication activities on the Internet can be categorized as receptive or interactive. In the context of aural/oral skills, receptive activities involve listening. In receptive communication, students access information in the form of text, images, audio, and video. For receptive communication activities, there are websites that include ready-made exercises, e.g. true/false or multiple-choice questions. The options for advanced learners' listening activities include rewriting an audio segment in more simplified language. There are several benefits and limitations to using receptive communications on the Internet with language learners (Chinnery, 2010). Theoretically, these materials are available at any time and from anywhere, so long as a computer with Internet access is available. This access provides a virtually endless and free supply of current and authentic materials. However, audio and video technologies on the Internet also have some limitations. In order to successfully utilize these media, an Internet connection must be stable and constant. Extensive download times of materials or any other technical difficulties may discourage both students and teachers (Lafford and Lafford, 1997:230).

Teaching listening comprehension is undoubtedly a challenging task for teachers. The fleeting nature of sound makes it hard for listeners to focus attention on a particular word or phrase for detailed analysis. Therefore, many teachers slip into testing the learners' listening comprehension rather than teaching them how to listen effectively. Cooperative listening should serve as a means to promote strategic listening comprehension (Djiwandono, 2006:33). Instead of concentrating on the product of listening teachers should be interested in the process. For many years teachers have tended to begin their listening comprehension lessons by preparing learners for the vocabulary they will hear in the recorded material. After having listened to the material, the students were required to answer some comprehension questions, followed by pronunciation practice (Field, 2002:245). Now it is generally accepted that listening skills have to be taught like any other language skills. The current advantages of high-technology allow to use blended learning in English classrooms.

This article examines the practice of blended learning in the sense of its classic definition, look at some online activities teachers can select, and present some evidence of a positive contribution to the difficult task of second language acquisition.

Objectives of Study

The **objectives** of this research is to evaluate students difficulties in while- and post-listening activities, provide cooperative listening practice in ESP classes and to analyze learners' performance in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) listening tests in order to develop a sound approach to listening activities.

Methods and respondents

The **methods of research** include the application of self-assessment on while- and post-listening activities, the analysis of learners' performance in listening comprehension tests, and learners' feedback to cooperative listening practice.

The **respondents** were 97 full-time students who study English for Specific Purposes (ESP) at tertiary level.

Participants and research methods

The participants in this project were 75 full-time 1st and 2nd year students, 40 and 35, respectively, who studied English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The design of the ESP course reflected the students' needs in professional language, and the course was adjusted to the requirements for a Bachelor of Social Science degree. The majority of learners were in their early twenties, and females as males made just 5% of respondents. The level of proficiency was B2 or C1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

The method of gathering data employed learners' self-assessment of listening difficulties. This information is available online in students' weblogs which are included in the teacher's weblog (Kavaliauskienė, <http://gkaval.home.mruni.eu>). Students' performance in both online and traditional listening tests was filed for analysis and is compared with the relevant data of self-assessment. Moreover, the open-ended questionnaire was designed in accordance with accepted standards of constructing surveys (Dornyei, 2003). This is the most frequent method of identifying student attitudes - through self-reported data like questionnaires, interviews or diaries. This research used a brief questionnaire administered at the end of the term. The questions of the questionnaire on listening activities are reproduced in Appendix. The relevant to this study part of the questionnaire consists of 4 statements, to which students responded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Statistical processing of the data by a means of Software Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) included the computations of Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of reliability and Spearman correlation coefficients, which indicate the strength of relationships and their statistical significance. The findings are presented in the results section.

Results

As it has already been mentioned, in accordance with the scientific requirements to the surveys in Social Sciences (Dorney, 2003), all questionnaire statements were rated on the scale of five possible answers. The students rated each statement by circling or writing the appropriate number: 1 - strongly disagree, 2 disagree, 3 - not sure, 4 - agree, 5 - strongly agree. The responses are summarized below in Table 1. For the sake of clarity, positive answers (strongly agree and agree) and negative answers (strongly disagree and disagree) are added up. The data are presented in percentage.

Table 1. Responses of 1st and 2nd year students to the questionnaire on listening activities.

Statements	Agree, %		Not sure, %		Disagree, %	
	1PS	2PS	1PS	2PS	1PS	2PS
1. Prediction exercises before online listening are helpful for comprehension.	100	89	0	11	0	0
2. Listening to authentic online recordings is useful for improving listening skills	73	73	15	12	12	15
3. Post-listening exercises help to revise or master vocabulary	85	93	15	7	0	0
4. Traditional classroom listening to cassette/CDs recordings is as useful as listening online	91	81	9	19	0	0

The first column of Table 1 shows the relevant statements of the questionnaire. The second column displays the percentages of positive answers of the 1st and 2nd year students. The third column shows the uncertain amounts of responses, while the 4th column presents the negative responses. As it can be seen, the first row shows the students' positive attitudes to pre-listening exercises, 100% versus 89%. The second row demonstrates perceptions of listening to online recordings. Almost three quarters of respondents are positive of its usefulness, and the minority either disagrees or is not sure. The third row displays respondents' opinions on post-listening activities: 85% and 93%, respectively, support them. The last row presents the data on traditional listening to cassettes or CDs. The responses are basically positive, although there are some learners who are not sure: 9% and 19%, respectively. The obtained data have been processed statistically and the findings are presented below.

Discussion of statistical processing data

The obtained data have been processed statistically using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) in order to determine how comparable and reliable the data are. Internal consistency reliability was estimated by computing Cronbach's Alpha coefficients. According to the theory (Dorney, 2003), results are reliable if the value of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient is at least 0.60. Here the values of Cronbach's Alpha coefficient have varied from .61 to .96, which proves that obtained data are reliable. Computations of non-parametric Spearman

correlation coefficients (SCC) for each survey statement and a set of respondent groups have also been conducted by a means of SPSS. Generally Spearman correlation coefficients can range between negative one (-1.00) and positive one (+1.00) (Brown and Rodgers, 2002). Positive coefficients indicate direct relationships, while negative coefficients indicate inverse relationships. The larger the coefficient, positive or negative, the stronger the relationship, so that a correlation that is close to one, either positive or negative, indicates a very strong relationship, while coefficients that are near zero indicate very weak relationships. The value of statistical significance of correlation coefficients is important for the interpretation of the relationship between two samples. In other words, its appropriate value, at least 0.05, means that the relationship is not likely to be due to chance. Larger than 0.05 values of the significance level, even if there is a correlation coefficient close to +1.00 or -1.00, mean that the probability of the significant relationship between two items is smaller than 95% and, therefore, the relationship is likely to be due to chance. In this study, the following results have been obtained: for the first two statements the SCC are .948 and .998, respectively, and correlations are significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), while for the third and fourth statements the SCC are the same and equal to 1.00 and correlations are significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed). Therefore, it may be concluded that the relationships are not likely to be due to chance, and, in spite of the limited sample of respondents in this study, the results can be applied beyond it.

Performance in listening tests

It has been of interest to compare the 1st and 2nd year students' performance in online and traditional listening tests. The tests were administered at the end of the semester. Students listened to some recordings online and CDs / cassettes. For online listening various sights have been used, such as Breaking News English or BBC Learning English. For traditional classroom listening either advanced or upper-intermediate course books have been used (Haines, 2006; O'Connell, 2005).

It should be noted that overall students' grades have been good, within the range of 8 to 10 in a ten points system. However, the most reliable way of comparing grades of both streams is their statistical processing by a means of SPSS. First, the Cronbach's Alpha coefficients have been computed to check if the data are reliable. Second, Spearman correlation coefficients have been computed to check if there is a relationship between the data and if it is significant. Similarly as in the previous section, Cronbach's Alpha coefficients are around .08, i.e. exceed 0.6, which proves the reliability of the results. The computation of Spearman correlation coefficient for students' performance in online listening has shown that its value of .998 and correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed), i.e. the probability is equal to 95%, while in traditional classroom listening to CD / cassette recordings its value 1.00 and correlation is significant at the level of 0.01 (2-tailed), i.e. the probability is equal to 99%. Thus, it may be concluded that the relationships are not likely to be due to chance, and results can be applied beyond the limited sample of respondents.

Self-assessment of listening activities

Students describe their attitudes to listening activities in their weblogs. This information is available online at the site http://gkaval.home.mruni.eu/?page_id=346 in the Section “Studentų darbai 2010”.

Here are some passages from students’ self-assessment pages.

<http://aadomaityte.blogspot.com/> I enjoyed doing listening because it was interesting and improved my listening skills. Even though listening tasks weren't very difficult, sometimes I needed to hear it twice. I can say that I am satisfied with my performance on online listening but I still need to improve traditional listening skills.

<http://abajorinaite.blogspot.com/> I believe I was rather good at listening activities, online and traditional. For me, the traditional listening to cassettes seemed easier at that point that it is easier to concentrate to important ideas when the task is to fill in the gaps while listening.

http://jberzanskyte.blogspot.com Online listening and traditional listening in class has always been an interesting and easy task for me. However, traditional listening requires more attention and knowledge.

<http://obogusevic.blogspot.com> Online listening is another way to improve my vocabulary. It really helped me understand real English language, because we have listened to a lot of native English speakers. This exercise helped me improve my language skills. Listening to cassettes similarly as online listening helped me to improve my vocabulary and English language skills. One of the advantages of this exercise is writing down the tasks. This really helped me with my grammar and now I think that it is better than last year.

<http://rburnickaite.blogspot.com> Another very important activity is listening to a cassette. It differs from online listening, because these listening are far more difficult than online ones. Of course quality of the cassette, speed of speaking and outside irritants has influence on the results. Despite these facts, my results were good and I enjoyed it.

<http://kmuravjova.blogspot.com> I think that listening activity is still one of the hardest tasks to me. There was a lot of listening practice, especially online listening was very enjoying and interesting during the last term, and I consider that it will positively affect my final exam results.

Summing up, university students are positive about both types of blended listening and believe that listening practice had been beneficial for improving their ability to understand spoken English and learn vocabulary.

Conclusions

The practice of blended listening has proved to be beneficial in the ESP classes. Two streams of the students, the 1st and 2nd year, found blended listening equally useful in improving their listening skills. The statistical processing of the students’ responses has shown that the data are reliable and not likely to be due to chance in spite of the limited number of respondents.

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Appendix. Questionnaire on Listening Activities.

- Prediction exercises (True / False) before online listening are helpful for comprehension. 1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) strongly agree
- Listening to authentic online recordings is important for improving listening skills. 1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) strongly agree
- Synonym Match & Phrase Match after online listening help to revise or master vocabulary. 1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) strongly agree
- Traditional classroom listening to cassette / CD recordings is as useful as listening online. 1) strongly disagree 2) disagree 3) not sure 4) agree 5) strongly agree