

# Extensive Listening and It's Benefits on EFL Students

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## 英語教育における多聴の効果

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### Abstract

Extensive reading (ER) has been widely practiced and its benefits were recognized, but not much research has been done on the effects of extensive listening (EL) yet. There is no doubt that plenty of input is essential in the development of language skills and, considering the fact that people learn their mother tongue by listening first, it should be necessary to put more emphasis on EL practice.

Many of the recently published Language Learners' Literature books come with audio recordings, and web pages provide an ample amount of materials for listening practice online. Also, audiobooks are easily available, and the spread of portable audio devices such as the iPod and other MP3 players, the iPhone and other smart phones are enabling the learners to practice effectively. The learning environment is rapidly improving.

This research looks into the benefits of EL on lower proficiency EFL learners at a Japanese university.

### 要約

日本の英語教育においては学習者の「読む」「聴く」量が絶対的に不足しており、このインプット不足が英語運用能力向上を妨げているとの指摘はすでに多くの研究者によって報告され、またその欠陥を補う学習法として多読が提唱されてきた。筆者のこれまでの調査によってもその有効性は確認されているが、そもそも母国語の習得は耳から、すなわち聴覚からスタートすることを考えると、多聴の重要性にもっと焦点があてられるべきであり、学習も多聴から多読へと進むのが自然と考えられるべきである。近年のオーディオ機器の発達、インターネットの普及と高速化によって多種多様な音声素材が誰にでも容易に入手できるようになり、多聴学習環境も日進月歩の勢いで整ってきている。これらを活用し、より自然な言語習得に近い方法での学習法を考察し、検証した。

### キーワード

Extensive Listening,  
Extensive Reading,  
English as a Foreign Language

## 1. What is Extensive Listening?

Extensive Listening (EL), as opposed to Intensive Listening, is listening to fairly easy and enjoyable materials in large amounts without being constrained by pre-set tasks. Historically, especially in Japan, foreign language education tended to be inclined to the “intensive” side of learning, i.e. read carefully by looking up words in the dictionary and analyzing sentence structure and grammar. Educators reflected on this, and claimed this led to the students’ lack of acquiring communicative language skills, and advocated that more emphasis should be put on the “extensive” side of learning.

Harold Parmer, who was an English linguist and phonetician, and played an important role in reforming Japan’s Education in the early 20th century, first introduced Extensive Reading as a way of second language acquisition. (1921) The benefits of ER was well researched and proved by many researchers since. (Susseer & Rob, 1990; Day & Banford, 1998; Krashen, 2004) In Japan, Sakai (2002), and Furukawa & Itoh (2004) proposed that reading one million words makes it possible to acquire good language skills. Books and magazine articles on how to read extensively were published one after another, and “Let’s read one million words!” has become a sort of fad among ardent English language learners. More and more learners are following their instructions today.

EL was introduced as a way of second language acquisition with the same reason as ER, but much later. It’s been less than 10 years since this term appeared in research papers and learners started to practice EL. The reason EL didn’t start to receive attention until quite recently was because it was just impossible for learners to have access to massive amounts of recording materials, which were indispensable for EL, when radio, TV and cassette tapes were the only available source of listening materials. Today, however, with the rapid advancement of technology, portable audio devices such as the iPod and other MP3 players are easily available. More and more books and English textbooks come with CDs and CD-ROMs at reasonable prices. The number of audiobooks is greatly increasing. Web pages also provide an ample amount of materials for listening practice online, and the spread of the iPhone and other smartphones are enabling everyone easy access to a variety of English recording materials.

EL and ER share a lot of similarities, in methodology and practical implementation, but Waring (2010) points out several differences: (1) EL is constrained by time while in ER we can stop and go back easily. (2) In EL it is more difficult to use compensatory strategies when incomprehension occurs due to time difficulties. In ER we can look in a dictionary. (3) EL often involves the learner and an interlocutor, ER only the learner and a text. (4) Sounds change from speaker to speaker and because of accents, background noise etc., and make words more difficult to acquire. In reading the spelling / form is constant. (5) Many ‘pre-view’ strategies are unavailable to listeners - skimming and scanning for example. (6) The reader can control the speed at which he or she reads, but the listener cannot (without special recording equipment). (7) It is easier for a reader to stop and review / look up words. (8) Meanings often change due to changes in stress, intonation, pitch and volume etc. Antle (2011) adds that EL has the advantage of flexibility in terms

of who and when it can be done. In other words, students can engage in EL while walking, riding on a train or bus, or driving. Students can do EL anywhere and at anytime they could do ER. These suggest that EL can be practiced in the same way as ER, but the students should be guided to select easier materials in terms of vocabulary, grammar and plot of the story.

## **2. Why is Extensive Listening important?**

The reason why EL is important is basically the same as that of ER: sufficient amount of “input” is essential in order to acquire a working knowledge of a foreign language, but it has been neglected in conventional English education. While the amount we listen to our native language accounts for more than forty percent of our daily communication (Burely-Allen, 1995), English classes at Japanese high schools usually meets four times a week, which means the time students are exposed to English in class is approximately 300 hours in 6 years. There is no research data to show how much of this time is devoted to listening, but as Antle (2013) states “Of the four main English skills, listening is the skill our students will use the most; however, it has not received the same attention/class time as speaking, reading and writing.”

Infants learn their mother tongue first by listening to their parents and people around them, gradually catching on to the meaning of each word, and as the storage of words exceeds a certain amount, they start talking. It is widely recommended that parents read stories to their children, and as Esmá Codell, an elementary school teacher in the U.S., said in an interview on a VOA program, “Reading aloud to children works wonders”. (2009) No one doubts that listening extensively makes a significant contribution to language acquisition.

Of course, linguistic acquisition of a foreign language cannot be discussed in the same way as the native language. The living environment is quite different; we grow up listening to our native language constantly, and are surrounded by “teachers” who would correct the mistakes all the time. Just imitating the way we learn our native language is not enough. Yet, we should try to create our language learning environment as close to the native one as possible, which is the role of EL. Supplementary learning method should be applied in addition.

## **3. Practicing Extensive Listening**

To practice EL, the ten characteristics of ER, introduced by Day and Bamford (1997), and the “Three Golden Rules for Extensive Reading” by Sakai (2002) can be modified to suit listening; i.e. students listen to a variety of materials on a wide range of topics available as much as possible, mainly for pleasure, information and general understanding. They have the freedom to stop listening to material that fails to interest them, and pick up others. For this purpose, the students must have an easy access to a massive amount of EL materials with a variety of English levels. The school library at our university has approximately 1,500 copies of graded readers, about 1/5 of which come with recordings in the form of CDs or CD-ROMs. Students also have access to the Internet in and out of the classroom. These days most of them have smart-

phones and/or tablet PCs, which enable them to utilize every opportunity to listen to a variety of listening materials, from graded recordings and authentic materials, in “Englishes” around the world.

Selecting the right materials is also crucial. They should be within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary, grammar and sentence structure. ER has been widely practiced using Language Learners’ Literature (LLL), or more commonly known as Graded Readers, and its benefits has been well proved. LLL materials are specifically designed for ESL/EFL students and are categorized into levels of English with a limited number of vocabulary. These materials with audio recordings should meet the purpose of EL to start with. The number of CDs and/or CD-ROMs coming with LLL is growing at a rapid pace. Some recordings are also downloadable from websites. Moreover, since they are recorded by professional voice actors, the way they talk, as well as a background acoustic effect, attracts the learners. Even some of the students who failed to continue ER before could find joy in listening in English, which inspired them to start reading again after a while. When choosing the right level, however, it is necessary to note that the system LLL is classified differs depending on the publishers and the series. For example, “Level 1” in Penguin Readers, “Level 2” in Oxford Hotshot Puzzles and “Starter” in Macmillan Readers are all 300-word vocabulary level books.

In this research, a short listening comprehension test was given to the students to see if they knew at least 90% of the vocabulary in the story and understood the content without stopping or rewinding the audio while listening. The 200-word level graded readers with total words of approximately 800 to 900 were used in this test, and the students answered questions asking about some key points of the story. They were also asked how many unknown words they had encountered. By browsing through the book themselves, students tended to choose texts which were beyond their listening level, but as discussed in the previous chapter, listening can be more difficult than reading the same materials. The result of listening comprehension test shows about 2 levels below the students’ reading ability seem to be most relevant in EL.

Unlike ER, there is no need to instruct them not to look up words in the dictionary or pay too much attention to grammatical analyses of the sentence because this is not possible when they are listening to recorded materials. Also, there is no time to translate what they hear in Japanese. They have to comprehend in the order of what they hear, which is beneficial to those who have acquired the bad habit of always analyzing and translating in studying English.

After each student was guided as to which level of listening materials suits him/her, and instructed the rules to follow, they listened to materials in class for the first few weeks. Once they got accustomed to choosing interesting materials at their level of English, they started listening out of class at their own pace using their free time as much as possible. Students kept a short record of what they listened to, i.e. 2 to 3 lines of outline and impression of the stories. It’s important, though, that this should not distract the students’ continuous listening practice. Listening was very challenging to most of the students at first, but once they got accustomed to listening, not only did they enjoy it, but also the amount of their reading increased. EL practice has led to improving the students’ positive attitude toward learning.

## 4. Materials for Extensive Listening

### 4.1 Language Learners Literature (LLL)

LLL was developed in the 1930s for the purpose of making English literature more accessible to the foreign learners of English. Today, an array of publishers publish LLL series in a variety of genres, from classics to science fiction, horror, love stories, biographies, play scripts and non-fiction, to suit each and every reader's interest. The number of audio recordings accompanying LLL materials is also increasing.

The following is the list of major LLL series designed for EFL students. They are all classified by the vocabulary levels and are ideal for starting Extensive Listening practice.

- *Oxford Bookworms* with CDs (Oxford University Press, 253 titles)

This pioneering series of graded readers offers a variety of stories covering a wide field of stories from around the world. "Starters" come in three styles - comic-strip stories, narrative stories and interactive stories, "Library" contains classic and modern literature rewritten in easy English and "Factfiles" cover all types of non-fiction stories.

- *Oxford Dominos* with CD-ROM/DVD-ROMs (Oxford University Press, 75 titles)

This is a lively supplementary reading material which meets the interests of all levels of learners. Books come with integrated activities with support from illustrations and glossary definitions. The amount of text on the page is carefully controlled and new words are explained in on-the-page glossaries.

- *Dolphin Readers* with CDs (Oxford University Press, 40 titles)

This is a highly interactive series for young learners. It contains fiction and non-fiction books, and covers four main themes: grammar, living together, the world around us, and science and nature. It also makes extensive use of color illustrations, which stimulate the readers' interests and maintain their attention.

- *Oxford Classic Tales* with CDs (Oxford University Press, 30 titles)

In this series, traditional stories are carefully rewritten to suit the interest of younger readers. Rich illustration and activities attract children's attention and help enhance their knowledge of classical literature. Audio download is also available.

- *Oxford Read and Discover* with CDs (Oxford University Press, 50 titles)

This is a non-fiction readers series designed for students of English from age eight and older. Vivid stories provide a wide variety of non-fiction topics such as science and technology, the natural world, arts and social studies.

- *Penguin Readers* with CDs (Pearson Longman, 310 titles)

This series of adapted literature and original stories help learners build reading confidence through accessible language and a variety of appealing genres and topics, while vocabulary, grammar, and narrative content are carefully controlled over seven language-competency levels.

- *Penguin Active Reading* with CD-ROMs (Pearson Longman, 85 titles)

This is a new series featuring contemporary movie titles, classic, contemporary and original titles in five levels. The texts are combined with integrated activities to practice English and each book comes with an

interactive CD-ROM, which contains activities and a complete audio recording.

- *Cambridge English Readers* with CDs (Cambridge University Press, 84 titles)

This series features award winning original fiction for learners of English and offers a diverse range of books to suit every taste. The highest level is set to a vocabulary level of 3,800 words, which can become a bridge for advanced learners to start listening to authentic materials.

- *Cambridge Young Readers: Factbooks* with CDs (Cambridge University Press, 22 titles)

This is a series of non-fiction science readers which engages children in the world around them. The books encourage children's natural curiosity by offering answers to the questions they ask about the world. Titles are based on the following science strands: Life science, Physical science, Earth and space science. The series extends children's knowledge and curiosity about science whilst simultaneously helping to develop reading skills and language acquisition.

- *Macmillan Readers* with CD-ROMs (Macmillan Languagehouse, 115 titles)

This is a supplementary graded reading series designed for EFL learners to learn the skills necessary to read like a native and enjoy it at the same time. It offers a selection of well-known classics to recent popular works to keep learners interested. There are 6 levels with carefully controlled grammar and vocabulary, to meet the need of individual English learners.

- *Scholastic ELT Readers* with CDs (Scholastic, 19 titles)

Offered in three series: Popcorn Readers, My First Picture Books and Picture Books, classical stories and well-known tales were rewritten in modern settings to suit the interest of young learners. The main characters are introduced at the beginning of each book with illustrations and glossaries. Colored pictures are contained in all pages and the explanation of cultural background to broaden the learners' knowledge of the world.

- *Scholastic Readers* with CDs (Scholastic, 131 titles)

These readers have real child-appeal and include creative formats such as blogs and manga-stories as well as fact-files, interviews and cross-cultural information. They include brand new adaptations of film and TV hits including Robin Hood, Smallville, Pride and Prejudice and Billy Elliot.

- *IBC Audiobooks* with CDs (IBC Publishing, 39 titles)

In this audio book series, stories in the Ladder Series are rewritten into easy English with a limited number of vocabulary. It covers a wide range of genres from classics to contemporary non-fiction, and glossaries with Japanese translation are included at the end of each book. The speed of audio recording is controlled with Japanese EFL learners in mind.

## 4.2 Audio Books

A variety of audio books intended for native speakers of English are also easily available today. EFL learners can start with children's books and proceed to the genres of their liking as their listening ability improves. Audible (<http://www.audible.com/>) is probably the largest supplier of audio books online. It provides premium digital spoken audio information and entertainment on the Internet, and the content includes more than 100,000 audio programs from more than 1,800 content providers that include leading audiobook

publishers, broadcasters, entertainers, magazine and newspaper publishers, and business information providers.

### 4.3 Web pages

Web pages with audio files can be utilized immensely. There are pages intended for native speakers which read out bedtime stories and fairy tales, or teach children phonics and the alphabet. There are also pages designed for EFL learners that allow them to listen and learn English enjoyably. The following are some of the sites which are suitable for EL practice.

- *Starfall* (<http://www.starfall.com>)

This is a free public service to teach children to read with phonics. Systematic phonics approach, in conjunction with phonemic awareness practice, is best suited for preschool, kindergarten, first grade, second grade, special education, homeschool, and English language development (ELD, ELL, ESL). There are phonics journals and books paralleling the website.

- *Randall's Cyber Listening Cafe* (<http://www.esl-lab.com>)

This ESL listening web site helps ESL/EFL students improve their listening comprehension skills through practice with self-grading quiz pages. The contents include narrations, daily conversations, lectures, discussions and interviews in four levels from basic to advanced. There is a massive quantity of recordings in adults' and children's voices in a natural way of speaking.

- *English Listening Lesson Library Online* (<http://www.ello.org>)

This site provides EFL students with free listening, reading, and vocabulary practice. Audio recordings and video clips are classified into 5 levels and are recorded by many nationalities, including non-native speakers of English. Audio scripts are shown on the web page so that the learners can check what they hear. There are more than 1,200 recordings to date in the archives, and they can be sorted by levels, countries of the speakers, topics, and media.

- *English as a Second Language Podcast* (<http://www.esl-pod.com>)

This offers two types of audio recordings in a form of podcast. *ESL Podcast* is a conversation on various topics with explanatory narrations of vocabulary, idioms and expressions. *English Cafe* features talks and interviews on up-to-date topics from around the world. Both provide English at a slower speed and use everyday phrases and expressions. There are over 1,300 podcasts in the archives.

- *Voice of America* (<http://www.voanews.com/>)

*Voice of America Special English* (<http://learnenglish.voanews.com/>)

Voice of America (VOA) is an international public broadcaster of the United States federal government which provides a wide range of programming for broadcast on radio, TV and the Internet outside of the U.S. VOA Special English is a program designed for intermediate learners of English and is spoken more slowly and with a smaller vocabulary than regular programming. The web page also includes exercises such as vocabulary, idioms and everyday English lessons.

- *Spotlight* (<http://www.spotlightradio.net/>)

This is a daily 15-minute radio program which uses a special English method of broadcasting, with fewer words (a vocabulary of 1500 words) and shorter sentences (mostly one idea per sentence), and slower speed (about 90 words per minute, or half the normal speed). It covers many topics including arts, culture, science, technology, health concerns, relationships, human rights, and world issues.

- *CNN Student News* (<http://edition.cnn.com/studentnews/>)

CNN Student News is a ten-minute daily news program for middle and high school students produced by the journalists and educators at CNN. Transcripts for each show, discussion questions and the media literacy questions of the day are available on the web page.

More advanced level students can be encouraged to listen to online news such as *BBC World Service* (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldserviceradio>), *CNN.com International* (<http://www.cnn.com>), and other major English news websites.

## **5.** Listening Amount and Test Score Improvement

### 5.1 Participants

The study was conducted on 43 non-English major Japanese college EFL students taking compulsory courses. They were taking two ninety-minute English classes per week, one of which was taught by a Japanese teacher and the other by a native speaker of English. The students' English levels ranged from elementary to high intermediate. About 70 % said they liked English; their motivation to study English could be rated as relatively high.

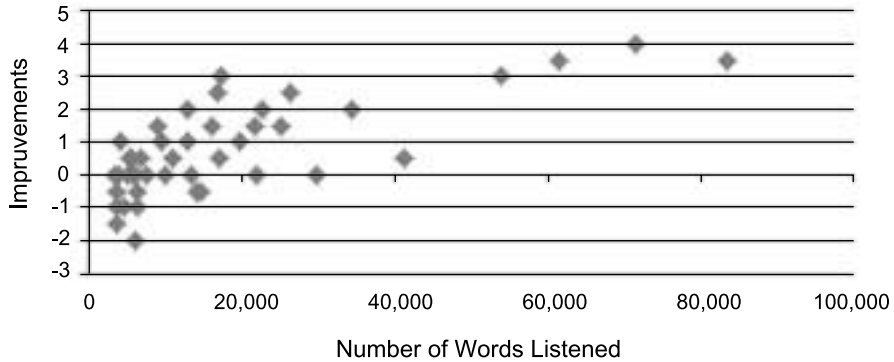
### 5.2 Procedure

First they were informed of the basic rules for EL and guided to choose the appropriate level of materials to start with. After they got accustomed to the task and picked their own pace of listening, they chose their listening materials individually and listened as much as possible out of the class. This continued for a whole school year.

The students were given a short listening comprehension test of 30 non-multiple questions at the beginning of the school year before starting EL, and then took the same test at the year's end. Figure 1 illustrates the amount students listened to and the test score improvements.



Figure 1 Listening Amount and Test Score Improvements



### 5.3 Result

About 30 % of the students stopped listening before they reached the listening amount of 10,000 words. Regarding the rest of the students, a positive correlation between the listening volume and the test score improvements was seen. There were a few students, however, who reported to have listened quite a lot but the score didn't improve much. It is possible that they were actually not listening to certain parts of the story because the audio keeps going even though the student's concentration is interrupted in midstream. When they are listening on a train or on a bus, they could easily be distracted by announcements or noises around them.

### 5.4 Discussion and Conclusion

In view of those whose score didn't improve in spite of the reported amount of listening, it may be helpful in EL to conduct a basic comprehension test after listening to each book. If the score is low even though the English level of the material is appropriate, it may be beneficial for the student to listen to the same story again. In addition, the teacher should keep track of the students' progress constantly and help them choose the right material they listen to next.

Also, how to motivate the students to keep listening is an agenda to be considered. Students who don't like reading books even in their native language wouldn't like reading or listening in a foreign language either. By sharing the story on twitter or Facebook, or introducing it in front of the class and exchanging comments with each other, they will be able to inspire the other students. Improving the student's accountability and building a curriculum in which EL, as well as ER, is integrated effectively is going to be the theme of my next research.

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