

“I Can See What I Hear”’: Reading-While-Listening (RWL) to Develop Listening Fluency

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Abstract: For many years, EFL learners have been struggling to develop listening fluency. It is also often stated that the less accessible listening process has made teachers test instead of teaching listening (Field, 2003). What teachers can do the most is to help them practice and learn; thus, a considerable amount of comprehensible input is a key factor to auditory comprehension. Unfortunately, learners often complain about being unable to understand what they hear due to the characteristics of spoken text. They need to visualize the words. Therefore, Reading-While-Listening (RWL) is like killing two birds with one stone. Combining both input types will increase comprehension; resulting in more acquisition (Long, cited in Ellis, 1994). This paper discusses the role of Reading-While-Listening (RWL) in EFL contexts. It explains why spoken texts are more difficult to acquire, discusses the benefits of Reading-While-Listening (RWL) as well as integrating it in input- and output-based practice in EFL contexts.

Keywords: Reading-While-Listening (RWL), listening fluency, input- and output-based practice

Introduction

Although listening is the skill people use the most in their daily lives, it is the “Cinderella skill” in many language teaching as it receives the least attention in the classroom and is often overlooked by its elder sister: speaking (Nunan, 1997). The fact that listening process is not accessible to inspection as that of other skills also supports the idea that listening cannot be “taught”. Unfortunately, it is considered to be one of the most difficult skills for EFL learners to acquire. Many learners have not acquired the automaticity to listen with ease the aural input delivered at a normal speech. It is true that both reading and listening are considered to be receptive skills, but there are some distinctive features which make listening more challenging for EFL learners.

Nature of Listening

Several features in listening might cause obstacles in understanding. The following is some of the most common ones, in which learners should attend to:

- Real-time process

In listening, learners have to undergo several communication processes at the same time, placing a far greater load on memory (Eastman, 1991; Ridgway, 2000). They have to “decode” or identify words, put them in context to understand the intended message while anticipating more messages to come. As a result, learners, especially those with lower proficiency, often experience cognitive overload. It also happens quite often that they will run out of time before completing this rigorous multitasking. In reading, learners can re-read the text to guess the meaning from the contexts; unfortunately, this privilege is not available in listening (Renandya & Farrell, 2011).

- **Rate of Speech**

Most research states that a normal speech rate in English is approximately 150-180 words per minute (Allison, 1990, cited in Chang, 2009). Within few seconds, an incredible amount of information needs to be processed, leaving a very little room for learners to rethink what they have heard. In other words, in order to understand speech produced in a natural context, the listening process should be automatic. For struggling EFL learners, spoken texts at normal speed, or even slower speed are already fast. This gap will pose a serious threat as they barely catch the words, let alone employ listening strategies, leading to partial or poor comprehension.

- **Variability of speech**

In spoken texts, words often undergo changes so they might sound different from their original forms in isolation. These features occur because of contractions, assimilation, or reduced forms. In assimilation, for instance, /n/ will become [m] before [p, b, m]; thus “ten people” will be heard as “tem people” (Field, 2003). Another variable would occur since some words are “glued” together. Field (2003) further states that pauses normally occur after twelve syllables or so; which places more burden to listeners as they have less idea where words begin and end. Thus, word recognition or lexical segmentation is crucial for learners in order to perceive the words correctly. The phrase “we went to assist a passenger” for instance, might be heard as “we went to a sister...” and it will cause miscomprehension.

- **Unfamiliar pronunciation/accent/dialect**

As there is an increasing number of countries giving an official status for English, there is a potential for more various accents, pronunciation, and dialects to grow (Crystal, 1987, cited in Kachru and Nelson, 2001, p. 11). These varieties range from English in the Inner to the Outer circle countries and some learners might have problems with phoneme discrimination. The words “I won’t go to London”, for example, might be heard as “I want to go to London” as learners make a small mistake based on phoneme discrimination (Field, 2003). Thus, it is possible that learners actually know the meaning of the words but cannot recognize them when they are spoken due to inability to unfamiliar pronunciation, accents, or dialects, resulting in a comprehension breakdown.

The complexities of listening process will cause less significant problems for those who have reached a particular threshold level of proficiency. To reach a high level of listening fluency, a considerable amount of comprehensible input is crucial. This input can be provided through visual and aural input (reading and listening). As text is something learners can get a grip on, it is worth including in their listening process; thus, Reading-While-Listening (RWL) can play its important roles.

Reading-While-Listening (RWL)

Reading-While-Listening (RWL), as the name speaks for itself, is a practice which is used to develop fluency in listening by involving reading (McMahon, 1983, cited in Askildson, 2011). This often takes the form of prerecorded audio books played in conjunction with silent reading of the written text. The written texts are used to assist listening comprehension by giving students more access to identify the letter-sound relationship. In addition, learners are introduced to the spoken rate, rhythm, and the natural flow of the language (Chang, 2009). There is also a body of evidence to show how RWL has benefited learners in many aspects.

First of all, Reading-While-Listening (RWL) will have direct influence toward listening fluency. A study by Chang (2009, cited in Chang, 2009) reported that Taiwanese college students with Reading-While-Listening (RWL) outperformed Listening Only (LO) learners in listening comprehension and gap-filling test.

Next, since learning cannot begin without understanding input (at the right level), it is true that “listening is thus fundamental to speaking” (Nunan, 1997). RWL also exposes learners to how words are used in context, altogether with the correct pronunciation, rhythm, and other spoken text elements which provide a good role model to learn speaking.

In addition, RWL has contributed to learners’ reading fluency. Reid (1971, cited in Askildson, 2011) found that students trained with an RWL treatment performed significantly better in levels of reading rate and comprehension. The finding of a study by Blum, Koskinen, Tennant, Parker, Straub, and Curry (1995, cited in Chang, 2009) also signified how learners improved their reading fluency after learning through RWL (or also called simultaneous reading and listening to audiotaped books). In another study of RWL in an L2 context, Amer (1997, cited in Askildson, 2011) found that EFL students who were given RWL treatments significantly outperformed those given only silent reading treatments in series of classroom treatments.

Aside from improving learners’ language skills, RWL has made listening tasks much more enjoyable for EFL learners. A study of learning vocabulary through three modes: Reading, Reading-While -Listening (RWL), and Listening Only (LO) among 35 Japanese learners conducted by Brown, Waring, and Donkaewbua (2008, cited in Chang, 2009) revealed that learners found the story presented in RWL mode the most comfortable one. Another small scale study conducted by Brown (2007, cited in Chang) also indicated the same preference.

The key point here is to let learners encounter words in more various ways to assist comprehension. After discussing the advantages of RWL, it is necessary to bring this theory into practice. In the following section, I will talk about guidelines and possible implementation of RWL in EFL context.

Reading-While-Listening (RWL) in EFL Context

There are many ways of conducting Reading-While-Listening (RWL). A more important issue is to have a balanced input- and output-based practice to help learners develop language proficiency. As for the input, Krashen (1987) elaborates that in order for language acquisition to take place, input (which can also be translated as teaching-learning material) is best provided if:

- It is comprehensible

It is necessary to ensure that the level of input is slightly beyond the learners’ current proficiency ($i+1$). This translates roughly as something easy enough for learners to enjoy and challenging enough to learn. If it is too hard, they will get frustrated and stop learning and if it is too easy, they lose interest and stop trying.

- It is interesting and/or relevant to the learners

Many people are so addicted to games or hobbies that they will spend hours and hours doing it without any resistance. This fun factor is what drives them and the same principle also applies in language learning. Learners will learn more if they have a personal investment in what they do. It is not an easy task but once it is met, learners can spend hours and hours “learning” without the need for constant teacher monitoring.

- It is not grammatically sequenced

As individual differences exist among learners, it is difficult to sequence lessons. Unsequenced but natural input will contain a rich variety of structures, providing $i+1$ for all learners. Thus, this comprehensible input will give learners natural review of recycling as $i+1$ is included naturally.

- It is provided in sufficient quantity

Language learning should contain substantial quantities of input to build learners’ language repertoire. No research has been specifically carried out to measure the amount of input

needed to acquire a language although thousand hours of input is probably the general agreement among researchers (Ellis, 2002, cited in Renandya, 2012). It is also safe to assume that the larger the amount of input is, the bigger the chances the learners have to acquire a language.

If these criteria are fully met, students will automatically spend hours and hours “learning” without the need for constant teacher monitoring. After getting a particular amount of input, output-based practice should be designed to help learners to use English more fluently and accurately. Most of the time, teachers have to follow a particular curriculum, so the following is proposed as a part of extensive listening which has proved to be beneficial to help students become more fluent listeners (Renandya, 2011)

The Reading-While-Listening (RWL) material I am going to use is English movies with English subtitles. Not only are they interesting, there are many other significant advantages of using them. First of all, they are authentic as they reflect the way a language is used in context. In addition, learners are allowed to work at their own pace since they can simply rewind and fast forward the movies, giving them enough time to understand the story, learn the vocabulary, phrases, and idioms, and practice their pronunciation. To make it more meaningful, they can take notes of new vocabulary and double check from their notes when they go back over it once more. This usually work best with teenage or university students. The following is the suggested activities which include RWL in balancing input- and output-based practice:

- Do a quick warm-up to get students interested in the topics by asking them about their favorite movies, actors, and actresses.
- Ask the students to choose their favorite English movies/TV series (in groups/pairs) and tell them to watch them as much as possible before selecting one episode as their group project. This way, they will have more enthusiasm and excitement as they have more control in their own learning. Make sure we do a quick survey about typical favorite movies among our students to help us interact with them.
- Ask the students to watch it with English subtitles several times.
- After having enough input, the output-based activities could be done in many various ways. For one thing, you may ask them to perform/role-play some scenes of the movie to give them a speaking practice. If teachers want to work on their writing skills, they can ask them to rewrite the scenario with different plots/endings.
- After the third or fourth time of their RWL, most students will unconsciously improve their listening fluency. This repeated RWL on a particular movie is also related to narrow listening, which leads to a higher degree of comprehension (Krashen, 1996). The same step was taken by national debate champions in China who watched movies over and over again until they got it all right (Yanren, 2007) and by a group of French lower proficiency learners (Dupuy, 1999)

Due to different teaching-learning context, teachers will be the best judge to adopt and adapt this course plan.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have set out some theoretical, empirical, and practical aspects of how to develop listening fluency by highlighting the importance of Reading-While-Listening (RWL). It can assist learners’ transitions to fluency due to its twin advantages of involving both visual and auditory input; which will give learners more access to identify the letter-sound relationship. A balanced input- and output-based practice should also be carefully

planned to develop listening fluency, as well as other skills, as learners immerse themselves in a variety of ways.

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