

# How and why to use extensive listening in the classroom

**Alex Wright**

## **Introduction**

Extensive reading has received a lot of attention over the last few years. Many schools are implementing extensive reading programs and buying books for libraries, but mysteriously in this rush to endorse extensive reading, extensive listening has not been endorsed in the same way. It is seemingly self evident that listening is at least as important a modality as reading in terms of language study and extensive listening is a natural sibling of extensive reading. In spite of this, extensive listening has received comparatively, some would even say mysteriously, little attention compared to extensive reading. There has been little research on the subject and universities are not rushing to set up extensive listening programs to complement their extensive reading programs. This is a situation, which can and should be rectified for reasons and with methods laid out in this paper.

## **Difficulties in administering extensive listening**

It could be that some small difference in the difficulty of administering extensive reading and extensive listening could have led to the disparity in how much each has been adopted. In the case of extensive reading the only thing that is required to do it is the book itself. In extensive listening some kind of apparatus is required to play whatever audio text the student will be listening to. In the case of extensive reading, in class extensive reading time is relatively easy to administer whereas for students to listen to their own self selected materials they would all need their own CD players or computers. In addition to this, audio materials might be expensive to purchase. If a school wanted to administer an extensive listening program with graded reader CDs they would have to purchase all of the CDs with the books at, in many cases, double the cost of purchasing the books by themselves. Considering the high cost that many universities undergo buying new books and replacing unreturned

books, adding CDs to the mix might be a serious financial burden, which could deter universities from adopting extensive listening. Lastly, as will be discussed later in the paper, listening materials are harder than reading materials. There is a much higher point of entry in terms of English skill for fluent understanding of listening materials compared to reading materials. All these reasons could have contributed to the neglect of extensive listening by teachers and researchers.

The difficulties listed above are slight and should not prevent our field from researching and implementing extensive listening in the classroom. These problems should be worked around so that students can enjoy the same benefits of fluent listening that they are starting to enjoy with reading. In the following sections this paper will discuss what extensive listening is, why its beneficial and how to implement an extensive listening program.

### **What is extensive listening?**

Extensive listening is very similar to extensive reading except instead of reading the students are listening. What this means is that like in extensive reading, learners self select material according to their level, and listen to a lot of material. The learners select materials, which they can comprehend fairly well without having to refer to a dictionary. Ideally to allow for adequate comprehension learners should have *at least* 95 percent vocabulary coverage of the materials they select (Laufer, 1989). This means that they understand 95 percent of the running words in any text they select. Like in extensive reading there should be no, or at least minimal assessment (let's be fair, we have to grade our students) after the students have finished listening to their chosen materials. Assessments should mainly focus on whether the students have actually done the listening and how much of it they did rather than on assigning them a grade based on how well they understood. By focusing on how much they listened to rather than on how well they understood, the assessment rewards the student's level of effort rather than their level of skill, which can be positive for motivation (Dörnyei, 2001). Like in extensive reading students doing extensive listening should be focused on understanding the message of the text and hopefully being entertained by its content.

### **Why do extensive listening?**

Extensive listening provides a very important condition for language learning, namely, it gives the students a lot of comprehensible input. As Krashen (1981) says, comprehensible input is a necessary and sufficient condition for second language acquisition. While some may dispute Krashen's claim that focus on language form or output is unimportant, including this author, few would dispute the primacy and necessity of comprehensible input in learning a second language.

There are many benefits to language acquisition associated with comprehensible input. Comprehensible input allows us to consolidate what we already know about a language (Waring, 2009). It allows us to learn which words are frequently used with which other words and thus builds our knowledge of collocations. Repeated exposure to vocabulary in comprehensible input allows us to retrieve words we know more quickly and therefore increases our fluency (Taguchi et al., 2004). Comprehensible input even allows us to make inferences about words we don't even know from context and grow our knowledge base of the language (Elley, 1989). Comprehensible input is vital for language learning and it is for this reason that extensive reading has had so much success as a method of teaching. Extensive reading is a very effective vehicle for comprehensible input and studies have shown that in many cases students doing nothing other than extensive reading can greatly outperform students receiving traditional language instruction (Elly and Mungubai, 1981). These findings will be discussed in more detail below.

While there has been little research on extensive listening, there has been quite a lot of work done on extensive reading. If we consider extensive reading as comprehensible written input, and extensive listening as comprehensible spoken input, we can see how it is likely that extensive listening and extensive reading would have similar benefits. Some of the most striking results supporting extensive reading come from a study done in the Fiji Islands mentioned above (Elley and Mangubhai, 1981). Twenty-four classes, two classes from each of 12 schools were divided into two groups. One group received normal instruction and the other mainly sat in their classes and read books. The results showed overwhelmingly superior results for students who were in the reading group even though the same amount of time was spent studying in both groups. The reading group even improved in speaking more than the control group. Another similar study conducted in Singapore has subsequently found similar results (Elley, 1991). As would be

expected, the reading group made their largest gains in their reading skill. They also made large gains in their writing skill, which were larger than the gains made in their speaking skill. Reading and writing are more closely related skills than reading and speaking so this is understandable. Would it not be reasonable to suspect that spoken input might have similar benefits for listening and speaking skills that reading has for reading and writing skills? If extensive reading greatly benefited writing skills might not extensive listening benefit speaking skills in the same fashion? Considering this, we are left to wonder why extensive listening is not employed to bring balance to student's development of the four skills.

In addition extensive listening as well as extensive reading can be beneficial to motivation for similar reasons. The benefits come from the fact that the materials are self selected, so the students can read about, and listen to things that they are interested in, as well as feel more in control of their own learning. The students can also select their own level of difficulty so that they can fluently understand the text. Being able to fluently understand something in English builds students' confidence in their own ability. A lack of strict evaluation allows the students to focus on enjoying the text and increases the intrinsic motivation of the task. While a test might instill a strong sense of extrinsic motivation, i.e., I don't want to fail, minimal assessment will cultivate a sense of intrinsic motivation, i.e., I can relax and enjoy doing this.

## **Materials**

The first thing to consider is what materials to use for extensive listening. The teacher needs a lot of materials, which are graded according to their level of difficulty. Of course there are a lot of listening materials available but what materials qualify as extensive listening depends on the level of the student. In this section some of the materials available will be listed and examined. The materials will then be assessed based on their how appropriate they are for each level of student. Some materials are broken down in terms of vocabulary necessary for comprehension using the BNC version of the vocabulary profiler Tom Cobb's lextutor website. This tool breaks how much vocabulary is necessary to achieve a certain percentage of coverage of a text, and therefore allows us to get a sense of how difficult a text is in terms of vocabulary load. Finally in the following section we will look at how to implement these materials into an effective extensive listening program.

One obvious source of materials for listening is materials which native speakers consume for entertainment like TV, movies and radio. These sources can be attractive because they are entertaining and contain natural language. There is one big problem with these materials for use in extensive listening, which is that the vocabulary threshold necessary to achieve adequate comprehension of these materials is far out of reach for all but very advanced learners. It is estimated that to achieve good comprehension of movies a learner would have to know at least 6000-7000 word families (Nation, 2006). Although these materials might be good for advanced learners and upper intermediate students with large vocabularies, or for more focused intensive listening activities with lower level students, they are not that good for extensive listening with beginner and intermediate students.

There are also a variety of web sites that offer graded or simplified English listening texts. One website often cited in lists of sources for extensive listening material is Ello. If we analyze the lowest level texts from Ello, we find that in order to get 95% coverage of the vocabulary necessary to understand it we would need to know about 2000 word families. Presumably at higher levels where much more material is available the vocabulary threshold would be even higher. Another source of listening texts is Voice of America, a website which provides simplified listening and written texts on a wide variety of topics. These texts are not graded according to level and while they are simplified somewhat and read fairly slowly, a learner would still need a vocabulary of around 3000 words to achieve 95% vocabulary coverage of the texts. The final website which deserves attention is English Central. English Central has a variety of short video listening texts which are leveled in three groups, easy medium and hard. The easy videos are reasonably easy and learners can get around 96.5% vocabulary coverage with 2000 word families based on an analysis of three easy video transcripts. The fact that the medium of English Central texts is video also gives learners context clues, which can aid their comprehension and make the texts easier than purely listening based texts with no visual feedback. The website also offers a variety of other tools to aid comprehension including subtitles and an online dictionary though this is of more use for students who want to use the videos for intensive listening.

All of these websites and other similar ones have simplified texts, which still require a substantial vocabulary in order to achieve adequate comprehension. The fact that in most cases a vocabulary of 2000-3000 is necessary for adequate comprehension makes these websites more appropriate as extensive listening

material for intermediate learners than for high beginner or elementary learners. Another problem that these websites suffer from is that it is difficult to access if the learners have used them or not. One way of checking if a student has listened is to develop comprehension questions or ask them to write a short summary of what they listened to. The texts on these websites are usually only a few minutes long, which means that the time spent assessing if the students listened through comprehension questions and summaries would possibly outweigh the time they spent actually listening. This makes these sites and listening texts more appropriate for in-class listening, which is a little different than extensive listening, and as suggestions for self-study. The exception is English Central, which automatically records which videos a student has watched and allows the teacher to monitor how many videos the students have seen. This makes English Central a good practical candidate for extensive listening for low intermediate level students and up.

The last main source for extensive listening material is CD recordings of graded readers. One good point about this material is that it is graded and there is a lot of it. We find that if we look at the vocabulary component of graded reader CDs, that the easiest CDs can be comprehended with a vocabulary of about 1000 word families. That means the entry point for using graded reader CDs for extensive listening is much lower than with other sources of listening texts. There are also graded readers of many levels, so there are graded reader CDs appropriate for extensive listening for all levels of students. For these reasons graded reader CDs are an excellent choice of materials for an extensive listening program for all levels of students.

### **Extensive listening for high beginner to elementary level students**

The following section will describe how to implement an extensive listening program with high beginner to elementary students. We have established above that because of vocabulary burden many materials are inappropriate for extensive listening at this level. Graded reader CDs, with their low level vocabulary threshold for comprehension level of around 1000 word families are the most appropriate extensive listening material for students at the high beginner to elementary level.

To administer an extensive listening program using graded reader CDs there are several important considerations. The first consideration is getting the listening material to the students. This can be done in a few ways. One possibility is for students to borrow the CDs from the school library and listen to them at home or on

CD players in the library. This is only possible at institutions that have a large collection of graded reader CDs in their libraries. Another option is for the teacher to bring in enough CDs for his or her class to choose from and borrow to listen to on their own time. The students could then return the CD they borrowed in the next class meeting and borrow another one. If this strategy is used the teacher must be careful that students actually return the CDs intact possibly imposing some kind of penalty on the students if the CDs are not returned.

If teachers were allowed to use digital methods to distribute these materials there would be considerably easier options available, but these options are legally restricted at the moment by copyright law. There are some audio versions of graded readers available with publishers' approval for free online. These might be convenient to use but might restrict a teacher's selection of what materials they want their students to listen to as these free online resources are typically written with a child audience in mind rather than an adult audience. These resources should be considered by teachers who do have the resources necessary to acquire graded reader CDs themselves, or do not belong to schools which have graded reader CDs. A link to a website which has collected links to free audio versions of readers is posted in the sources of material section.

The next important consideration is leveling the material appropriately. One thing a teacher must be aware of when trying to administer an extensive listening program is that listening texts are much harder than their written counterparts. If we look at the case of a graded reader compared to its listening counterpart we find that the CD is much harder than the book. For one thing, in listening the words keep coming and the listener can't listen at their own pace, as they can when reading. If the learners don't have enough fluency they will not be able to understand what is said in the listening. Another reason listening is harder is that in reading there is sometimes context provided by images. In the case of graded readers, especially at lower levels, students get a lot of contextual support from the images in the books. The images might clarify situations and unknown low frequency words. The CDs don't have these pictures so they are much harder to understand. Of course it is possible to look at the pictures in the book while listening, which would lessen the difficulty. The lack of pictures and fluency demands of the listening CDs is the reason that it is recommended that learners listen to books two levels below their reading level (Waring, 2009). With this in mind it's a good idea to supply students with a lot of the lower level reader CDs. Unless the majority of the class can read

level three readers or above, the majority of the CDs made available should be level S with some level one and a couple level two or three CDs thrown in for learners who are at a higher level. Students should be directed to choose their own CDs and reduce the level of the CDs they are listening to if they cannot adequately comprehend the CD they chose.

The next important consideration is evaluation. Students should be evaluated primarily on how much they listened to rather than on their level of comprehension of what they listened to. Each graded reader listening text is fairly long ranging from 10 minutes to several hours. It is feasible to ask students to write a short summary of what they listened to because these texts are longer. This means that students would spend more time listening than writing up something the teacher can use to access if they listened. In addition to this, there is now software for online teaching platforms like Moodle, which allows students to take short online quizzes to access whether they have read a book and tabulate how many books they have read. A link to this website can be found below. This software can be repurposed for extensive listening if graded reader CDs are used. Students could take the same quizzes they take for graded readers after listening to the CDs. This makes graded reader CDs the superior option compared to other materials in terms of ease of assessment. The teacher should choose one of these two options to access and grade their students on how many graded reader CDs they have listened to.

### **Extensive listening for pre-intermediate to intermediate level students**

If we administer an extensive listening program to intermediate level students then more options in terms of material are available. Grader reader CDs are still a good option at this level and can be administered the same way as described above. Other texts are also possible to be used including a variety of simplified texts available on the Internet at sites described above. In terms of practical considerations, English Central is the best option available in addition to graded listener CDs for extensive listening at this level because it has a relatively light vocabulary load for the easiest level texts and is easy to assess.

To use English Central the instructor must sign up and create a class page. The teacher then can give students a URL address where they can join the class page. Students can then be directed to watch however many videos on English Central that the instructor chooses per week. The instructor can get information on how



many videos the students watched on English Central and grade them based on that number. The material is provided by the website, the students choose the right level of material based on what they understand and assessment is made easy with electronic tools which allow teachers to directly see how much listening occurred. This also eliminates time spent in assessment of students proving how much they have listened to with other non listening related tasks like summaries.

### **Extensive listening for high intermediate to advanced level students**

If we administer an extensive listening program to advanced students, then the options in terms of material really open up a lot more because of the learners higher levels of vocabulary knowledge. The teacher no longer has a big role in terms of selecting and providing appropriate material because a wide range of materials at an appropriate level are plentifully available. Students can simply be directed to watch TV shows or movies of their choice and to write a short summary of what they watched. English TV and movies are everywhere and students can be directed online, to the library, or to their video store to find materials. The teacher can then take the learners summaries and use them to evaluate how much listening material the students were exposed to.

### **Conclusion**

Extensive listening should be an integral part of many more teachers teaching practice. If we are giving students extensive exposure to reading input, it follows that we should do the same for spoken input to achieve balanced development of skills. There are some difficulties associated with administering extensive listening but these can be overcome. It is especially important that teachers be aware of, evaluate, and select appropriate materials, which take into account their students level of ability, as well as practical considerations of cost and ease of evaluation. This paper has outlined what materials are available and how teachers can practically apply those materials to their own classes. Hopefully teachers and researchers will look more deeply into this neglected area of English language teaching in the future and students will benefit from the results of their efforts.

## **Sources of material**

Graded reader CDs

Audio versions of graded readers

English Movies and TV

Websites

E L L L O

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

This site contains hundreds of free online listening materials especially dialogues

Voice of America Special English

(<http://www1.voanews.com/learningenglish/home/>),

This site contains world news read in simple and clear English.

Storyline Online

(<http://www.storylineonline.net/>),

This site contains children's stories read aloud by professional artists.

English central

(<http://www.englishcentral.com/>)

Contains: hundreds of short videos on various topics

<http://www.esprintables.com/forum/topic.asp?id = 32378>

This is a link to a page on a forum, which contains links to hundreds of free audio recordings of readers

Moodle reader

<http://moodlereader.org/>

This is a free module of moodle, which automatically administers short comprehension quizzes for a wide range of graded readers and then keeps track of how much they have read

## References

- Cobb, T. Web VP/BNC-20. retrieved from <http://www.lex tutor.ca/vp/bnc/>
- Dörnyei, Z. (2001). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Elley, W. B., & Mangubhai, F. (1981a). *The impact of a book flood in Fiji primary schools*. Wellington: New Zealand Council for Educational Research and Institute of Education.
- Elley, W. (1989). Vocabulary acquisition from listening to stories. *Reading Research Quarterly* 24 (2), 174-187
- Elley, W. B. (1991). Acquiring literacy in a second language: The effect of book-based programs. *Language Learning*, 41, 3, 375-411.
- Krashen, S. (1981). Second language acquisition. *A Survey of Linguistic Science*. Ed.
- Laufer, B. (1989). What percentage of text-lexis is essential for comprehension? In C. Lauren & M. Nordman (Eds.), *Special language: From humans to thinking machines* (pp. 316-323). Clevedon, England: Multilingual Matters.
- Nation, I. S. (2006). How large a vocabulary is needed for reading and listening?. *Canadian Modern Language Review/La Revue canadienne des langues vivantes*, 63 (1), 59-82.
- Taguchi, E., Takayasu-Maass, M., & Gorsuch, G. J. (2004). Developing reading fluency in EFL: How assisted repeated reading and extensive reading affect fluency development. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 16 (2), 70-96.
- Waring, R. (2009). The inescapable case for extensive reading. In A. Cirocki (Ed.), *Extensive reading in English language teaching* (pp. 93-111). Munich, Germany: Lincom.
- Waring, R. (2010) Extensive listening Materials. retrieved from <http://www.robwaring.org/el/materials.htm>