

Extensive listening versus listening strategies: response to Siegel

Andrew Blyth

This article replies to Siegel's (2011) response to Renandya and Farrell's (2011) research report on extensive listening (EL). Renandya and Farrell presented empirical research claiming that EL is more effective than teaching listening strategies (LS). Siegel's response was in support of LS, though his article is somewhat problematic. In this article, I will counter some of Siegel's claims and conclude with a call for more research to expand ELT listening theory and pedagogy.

Siegel admits that there are virtues to including EL in listening training, though he incorrectly interprets Renandya and Farrell's article. Siegel states 'It is difficult to accept EL as the main component of L2 listening . . .' (p. 318), though Renandya and Farrell's own words are 'One effective way . . . is through extensive listening, . . .' (p. 56). In contrast, for listening instruction, Siegel states ' . . . L2 teachers . . . can explain their own mental process . . . to deal with incoming speech' (p. 320), a sentence that requires unpacking. Buck (2001: 38–41) provides a summary of research on speech rates. L1 listeners' comprehension is unaffected by speeds of up to 250 words per minute (wpm), whereas L2 listeners were optimal at 127 wpm. At such speeds, it is hard to imagine that many L1 or L2 teachers can have the insight to 'explain their own mental processes'. For instance, when a low frequency word like 'onomatopoeia' is spoken, the L1 listener holds this word momentarily in a phonological loop until it is recognized or the listener gives up; a simple mental process that perhaps a majority of teachers (L1 or L2) are unaware of.

Time

Siegel points out that developing L1 listening takes time, but that any L2 listening instruction should be truncated; however, this feels like short-changing the customer. EL, like extensive reading, provides students with the opportunity to gain experience in English listening. It has been argued that students *need* to spend a lot of time to develop their listening skills, much in the same way that when we learn to ski we *need* to spend time simply practising it (Blyth 2011). For some skills, there are no short cuts. So when we teach students pronunciation of words and sentences, they *need* to practise recognizing them embedded in natural speech in order to develop automaticity¹ in recognition. This is particularly pertinent for Japanese, who have a limited vowel range compared to English, and so they would benefit from repeated practise discerning 'work' and 'walk' for instance. It can be

argued that explicit teaching of strategies should help students with this, but as explained below, this is questionable.

Learning bad habits?

Siegel claims that in EL, students are open to learning bad habits, though he provides no explanation or examples of this. According to Siegel, if students make mistakes, they are encouraged to try harder next time. Blyth (op.cit.) realized that many teachers' concept of teaching listening is answering comprehension questions and not so much focus is placed on meaning within a wider social context or on listening for pleasure. It is clear that Siegel assumes that EL is coupled with 'correct' and 'incorrect' comprehension. However, when listening to a political debate, for instance, each person will carry away with them their own interpretation and opinion of the matters discussed. Clearly, there is no correct or incorrect interpretation of such discussions, though low-level mistakes are possible. Field (2003) points out that students can mistake 'he went to assist a passenger' for 'he went to a sister passenger', a re-syllabification error that cannot be corrected by strategy training. Consequently, it can be argued that different listening pedagogy is needed.

Explicit or implicit teaching?

Siegel argued that if EL was the only tool to use in teaching listening, then the teacher's role would be simply to make students become autonomous learners relegating the teacher to a 'non-essential bystander'. In Second Language Acquisition, it is known that explicit and implicit teaching is important in language instruction. However, currently, there is no empirical research identifying which listening skills are best taught explicitly or implicitly.

Bonawitz, Shafto, Gweon, Goodman, Spelke, and Schulz (2011) published an elegant experiment that should have ramifications in education. They presented four-year-old children with a toy that had some defined functions. Under one set of conditions, 'a helpful adult' told each child about some or all the functions of the toy. Under another set, the children were not told anything about the functions of the toy. In the first situation, children played with the toy for a short while before ending play of their own accord and having found perhaps one additional function. However, under the other non-instructional conditions, children played with the toy for longer, found *all* the functions, and Bonawitz *et al.* assumed that the children were still looking for more. Consequently, Bonawitz *et al.* suggest that explicit instruction impedes learning, while autonomy allows for greater development of knowledge. This may explain why EL in Renandya's article was more effective than explicit strategy training.

The problem with explicit strategy instruction

Currently, there is no credible empirical evidence in ELT that states that LS instruction does indeed improve student listening performance (Renandya and Farrell op.cit.), but Siegel cites a French as Foreign Language study and a literature review to support his claim (p. 320).

Siegel states

Specific strategies can be taught and practised in listening classes. Students can have opportunities to transfer their L1 listening procedures to L2 (for example Buck 2001; Field 2003).

Lynch (2009: 81–7), an author Siegel cites, provides a summary of articles that cast significant doubt on LS instruction. I admit that LS may possibly be one tool that assists L2 listeners, but what ‘L1 listening procedures’ can be transferred? No examples are given. Regarding ‘... for example Buck 2001; Field 2003’, I am not aware of either author suggesting L1 transfer can help. According to the index of Buck (2001), pages 51 and 103 contain the only references to strategies, but these do not mention L1 to L2 transfer. Furthermore, Field (op.cit.: 325) hints at his doubts about over reliance on top-down listening, and he argues that such transfer attempts can be problematic.

It seems many LS researchers assume that strategies from reading can be transferred into listening. If readers have difficulties, they will use compensatory strategies. The reader’s eyes will flit back and forth over the text, making and checking comprehension hypotheses. For instance, ‘The person who cooks ducks out of washing the dishes’ (from Aitchison 2008: 212). This strategy is obviously possible with written text; however, it cannot be seen to be always viable in listening. The listener has a very short moment to comprehend such text before further speech stampedes the listener’s mind. After all, strategies are only what any person would use when their normal listening processes have momentarily failed; consequently, strategies are not the main listening processes ordinarily used, so why should LS be the main listening processes ordinarily taught? Furthermore, Lynch (op.cit.: 82) cites a study that found that students were disadvantaged when explicitly taught reading strategies.

Future research

It is possible to fill EL versus LS discourse with speculation. The fact is we do not know what learning is taking place in learners’ minds during EL. Are they developing bottom-up phonological knowledge? Can explicit phonological instruction benefit learners’ listening? Are they independently developing and deploying strategies? Has strategy acquisition and deployment for listening been scuppered by explicit teacher involvement? Is simply providing more practise time more efficient than explicit strategy instruction true in all contexts? Additionally, are there more effective listening pedagogies available? Clearly, more research is required.

Final revised version received September 2011

Note

1 A term from Aitchison (2008).

References

Aitchison, J. 2008. *The Articulate Mammal: An Introduction to Psycholinguistics*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Blyth, A. 2011. ‘How teachers teach listening in Japan: Part I’. *KOTESOL Proceedings 2010: Advancing ELT in the Global Context*. Seoul: KOTESOL.

Bonawitz, E., P. Shafto, H. Gweon, N. Goodman, E. Spelke, and L. Schulz. 2011. ‘The double-edged

sword of pedagogy: instruction limits spontaneous exploration and discovery’. *Cognition* 120/3: 322–30.

Buck, G. 2001. *Assessing Listening*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Field, J. 2003. ‘Promoting perception: lexical segmentation in L2 listening’. *ELT Journal* 57/4: 325–34.

Lynch, T. 2009. *Teaching Second Language Listening*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Renandya, W. and T. Farrell. 2011. ‘“Teacher, the tape is too fast!” Extensive listening in ELT’. *ELT Journal* 65/1: 52–9.

Siegel, J. 2011. 'Thoughts on L2 listening pedagogy'.
ELT Journal 65/3: 318–21.

The author

Andrew Blyth is a doctoral student with the
University of Canberra, Australia, where he studies

applying psycholinguistic and phonological
listening theories to ELT pedagogy. He also teaches
at various universities in Nagoya, Japan.

Email: ablyth@uni.canberra.edu.au