

Raising Phonetic Awareness through Repeated Reading to Facilitate Out-of-class Listening Practice

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Abstract: This study examines how and to what extent providing three-minute lectures on English phonetics together with three-minute assisted repeated read-aloud training exerts an influence on students' listening anxiety and listening behavior. A questionnaire was administered to all students in a TOEIC listening class at the beginning and the end of the fall semester in 2013. Every week, the teacher introduced one of the phonetic characteristics of English such as stress-timed rhythm, liaison, schwa, the flapping sound of intervocalic /t/ and /d/, and so on, followed by students engaging in assisted repeated reading aloud of the TOEIC transcript as a way of solidifying what they just learned. The comparison between the first and the second questionnaire showed that quite a few students changed for the better with many admitting that the lectures and the read-aloud activities were beneficial in overcoming anxiety toward listening as well as changing their listening behavior.

Keywords: *English phonetics, assisted repeated read-aloud, TOEIC listening*

Introduction

In Japan, they often say, “Children grow as they look at the back of their parents,” meaning that children tend to imitate what their parents do and learn life lessons without being told whether the parents' behavior is good or bad. Unfortunately, when it comes to language learning, there is little chance for students to improve their listening skills by simply listening to teachers talk or audio materials. And yet, quite a few students taking exam preparatory courses seem to believe that emerging themselves in the listening part of mock questions is necessary and sufficient to improve their listening skills and get a good score on the test. Not only students but also some teachers seem to believe that the aim of such courses is simply to bombard students with mock questions. Considering the fact that the TOEIC test is, unlike criterion-referenced tests such as mid-term exams, one of the norm-referenced tests that reflect one's English proficiency, helping students improve their English proficiency itself, by giving them tips on how to achieve, it seems to be a top priority. Providing only stop-gap measures such as correcting mistakes and giving explanations after solving problems is nothing but a tentative solution. Here the importance of introducing strategy training sets in. As they say, “Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach him how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.” However, incorporating learner strategy training inevitably is similar to advertising new products in a way in that some students might be attracted to the introduced strategy and continue using

it in their out-of-class learning whereas others might be indifferent to it. In reality, there is some disagreement among researchers as to how effective such training is. Rees-Miller (1993), for example, doubts the effectiveness of learner strategy training, claiming that there is no verifiable evidence that awareness of strategies leads to L2 learning success. Macaro (2006), on the other hand, goes so far as to mention that “successful learning is no longer linked to the individual learner’s frequency of strategy use, but to his or her orchestration of strategies available to him or her,” and “strategies do not make learning more efficient; they are the raw material without which L2 learning cannot take place (p.332).” It is impossible to foresee whether students will keep resorting to the learned strategy hereafter, but helping them broaden their strategies repertoire will probably not hurt. In this present study, the writer incorporated phonetics and reading aloud into the classroom because very few Japanese students seem to know proper accent and intonation of English words, let alone English prosody (i.e., the stress-timed rhythm of the language). With respect to reading aloud, there are two strategies invented to help struggling learners acquire suprasegmental features of English; assisted reading (Heckelman, 1969) and repeated reading (Dahl, 1979; Samuels, 1979). Assisted reading is a strategy that provides students with an opportunity to practice reading a passage orally with a teacher, while repeated reading is one that helps students read a passage repeatedly in order to develop both fluency and accuracy. It was found that repeated reading led to improved speech pausing and intonation (Dowhower, 1987), and Herman (1985) found that the improved skills through repeated reading were transferred to previously unread materials. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) support assisted repeated reading, a combination of the two strategies mentioned above, where students read a passage repeatedly with audio material that serves as scaffolding. Underhill (1994) claims that reading aloud helps acquire stress-timed patterns of English. On the other hand, just like the case of learner strategy training, the effectiveness of reading aloud is under dispute among researchers, and most objections seem to center on the wrong use of the strategy. Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin (1996), for instance, criticize that the controlled texts for reading aloud do not reflect the spontaneous speech we hear in our daily life. Chun (2002) cautions that teachers should not spend too much time on listening and imitating in order not to bore students. Gibson (2008), acknowledging criticisms, mention that as long as teachers handle the strategy with sensitivity, reading aloud will be useful in helping students learn prosodic features of English. Kuhn and Stahl (2003) mention prosody as a primary element of fluency and it includes “appropriately chunking groups of words into phrases or meaningful units (p4),” to gain which is one of the main purposes of reading aloud training. In the research done by Stevick (1989) in which seven successful learners were interviewed, it was found that most of them used reading aloud as an out-of-class learning tool. One of them said the activity was helpful in chunking the text into sense groups. Another one found the activity was of great help to improve pronunciation. It seems safe to say that as long as teachers handle it with care and deliberation, reading aloud strategy training seems to have potential to become a basic remedy for students struggling to hear the English sounds that currently might sound like a spell to their ears. Also, introducing phonetics at the same time will probably not only facilitate students’ reading-aloud performance in the classroom but help

them when reading aloud new materials autonomously at home.

Study

Method

This study took place in a university TOEIC listening class in the Tokyo metropolitan area in 2013. The aim of the class is to help students score above 600 points on the TOEIC test. The target subjects consisted of fourteen students (four males and ten females). On the first day of the course, a questionnaire on anxiety toward listening, listening behavior as well as listening habits with nine items to be evaluated on a Likert scale (see Appendix) was administered. Believing that “even small changes initiated early on can make substantial changes down the line in terms of student motivation and achievement (Covington and Teel, 1996, p98),” the teacher told the class on the first day that he was planning to incorporate strategy training as a drastic measure to help them become better autonomous learners along with conventional stop-gap measures such as solving mock questions. Noels, Clément, and Pelletier (1999) found correspondence between the amount of teachers’ support of student autonomy and the increase of students’ autonomy. Dörnyei (2001) considers teachers’ influence together with knowledge and use of self-regulatory strategies to be two of the motivational influences that affect students’ executive motivation: the motivation to sustain the initial motivation while participating in activities. In order to make the best of this opportunity to motivate students, the teacher gave a detailed account of four learning strategies (cognitive, metacognitive, affective and social strategies) and the necessity of using the strategies, followed by an announcement that this particular class would mainly focus on cognitive (reading aloud training) and metacognitive (getting phonetic knowledge through lectures) strategies. The teacher also touched slightly on affective strategy (advising students on how to create a more comfortable learning environment) and social strategy (having students make pairs and take turns reading aloud a dialogue script). Oxford (2002) suggests that all four types of strategies be incorporated in the classroom, claiming that strategy training is best done when taught explicitly. Next, the teacher gave students an A4 handout of a transcript with two dialogues from part three and two monologues from part four of the TOEIC test on it, with which students were going to practice reading aloud. From then on, each lesson started with a three-minute lecture using PowerPoint Slides illustrating characteristics of English sounds such as the differences between Japanese (a syllable-timed language) and English (a stress-timed language), how to differentiate duration and intensity according to word types (content words or function words), liaison, schwa, the flapping rule and so forth. The lecture was followed by three-minute assisted repeated reading using an audio CD. After each lecture, the teacher distributed take-home PowerPoint slide handouts to students. In order to maximize the benefit from the text and to prevent students from getting bored, the teacher introduced various ways of reading aloud, i.e., repeating, overlapping, eye-shadowing, shadowing and looking-up and saying, which requires students to recite a part of the sentence while detaching themselves from the text facing

forward as if they were talking to somebody else. At the end of the course, the second questionnaire was administered.

Measures

Two dependent variables were measured: students' anxiety toward listening and their listening behavior. The dependent variable in questionnaire item 3 ("I do not know how I can improve my listening skills) expresses students' anxiety toward listening. As high as 71.4% of the students responded with "Strongly agree" or "Agree." to the question. I have heard quite a few students saying that because they do not have a clue as to how to go about improving their listening skills, they feel reluctant to spare the time for listening outside the classroom. Naturally, they listen to English even less often at home, falling into a vicious circle. The dependent variable in questionnaire item 7 ("I translate into Japanese while listening to English") expresses students' listening behavior. Surprisingly, 64% of the students very often or often translate English into Japanese in their brain while listening. With the answer "sometimes" included, the number jumps up to 93%. Naturally, such bad behavior impedes their listening because it is just like stepping on the accelerator and the brake at the same time. Among the students whose answer to questionnaire item 3 ("I do not know how I can improve my listening skills") was either strongly agree or agree, 80% very often or often translate into Japanese while listening to English.

Data Analysis

First, students' anxiety as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.57$, $SD = 0.65$) was significantly higher than as measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 0.73$), $t(13) = 6.57$, $p < 0.0001$, two-tailed, $d = 2.17$. The comparison between the answers to questionnaire item 3 ("I do not know how to improve my listening skills") on the first and second questionnaire shows that out of the ten whose initial answer was either strongly agree or agree, seven improved two points or more (one improved three points) on the Likert scale.

Next, students' listening behavior as measured by Survey 2 ($M = 3.07$, $SD = 0.95$) was higher than as measured by Survey 1 ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.70$), $t(13) = 2.41$, $p < 0.03$, two-tailed, $d = 0.84$. The comparison between the answers to questionnaire item 7 ("I translate into Japanese while listening to English") on the first and second questionnaire shows that out of nine students, whose initial answer was either very often or often, five improved two points or more (two improved three points) on the Likert scale.

As for the first dependent variable, anxiety toward listening, the mean difference between the first and second questionnaire was 1.5, and Cohen's d was 2.17 (a large effect size) while regarding the second dependent variable, students' listening behavior, the mean difference was 0.93 and Cohen's d was 0.84 (a large effect size). Judging from this, students seem to have got not a small impact from the activities in this TOEIC class in terms of reduced anxiety and listening to English. The questions added to the second questionnaire support this conclusion. With questionnaire item 8 on the second questionnaire ("I got motivated to improve my listening skill through lectures on the English sound system"),

six students (57 %) responded with “Agree,” followed by four students saying “Slightly agree” (28.6%) and two saying “Strongly agree” (14.3%). With the questionnaire item 9 on the second questionnaire (“I got motivated to improve my listening skill through reading aloud”), seven responded with “Agree” (50%), followed by five saying “Slightly agree” (35.7%) and two saying “Strongly agree” (14.3%).

The Changes

Below is an analysis of students (all pseudonyms) whose changes on the Likert Scale were worth studying closely.

The Change in Meiko

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Agree,” but it was “Disagree” on the second questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Often” to “Never.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Meiko wrote, “After learning about English phonetics, I became aware of the characteristics of English sounds and began listening to English proactively. My hobby is singing and I found the knowledge of phonetics very useful when singing English songs.” Meiko also wrote, “I used to have very little confidence in my pronunciation, and therefore, had not engaged in reading English text aloud until I took this class. But now I realize that the reason I cannot speak English well is that I did not practice speaking aloud. It is important to keep in mind that I cannot hear what I cannot say.”

The Change in Sora

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Agree,” but it was “Disagree” on the second questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Very often” to “Rarely.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Sora wrote, “When listening to English, I now feel that the percentage of what I can comprehend has increased. My understanding is that having knowledge about how English sounds enables me to deal with the stream of sound.” Sora also wrote, “I started practicing reading aloud English passages at home, and I find myself less overwhelmed by the fast speed of English more than before. In order not to forget this sensation, I want to continue practicing reading aloud.”

The Change in Asako

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Strongly agree,” but it was “Slightly agree” on the 2nd questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Very often” to “Sometimes.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Asako wrote, “Most of the knowledge I got about English phonetics in this class was new to me. I used to speak English with a strong Japanese accent, but now I desire to speak English more naturally. Reading aloud made me

realize that there are quite a few words that I know but cannot pronounce properly. Another good thing about reading aloud is that I was able to kick the habit of translating as well as relying on Japanese word order, and started reading text from left to right. My awareness to read English words in the proper order has increased.

The Change in Sayuri

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first^t questionnaire, the answer was “Slightly agree,” but it was “Disagree” in on second questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Often” to “Rarely.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Sayuri wrote, “I used to believe that I needed to read every single word in a sentence with an equal emphasis. However, after learning the characteristics of a stress-timed language, I became able to read English aloud more fluently.” “It used to be that I put unnecessary strain on myself when having to listen to English. But the strain decreased after I started reading aloud. Now I’m reading aloud text in the morning and it seems to activate my brain. I feel my listening skills have improved, although it has not reflected on my TOEIC listening score yet.”

The Change in Kai

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Agree,” but it was “Disagree” on the second questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Sometimes” to “Rarely.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Kai wrote, “After the lectures on English phonetics, I learned to focus on stressed words when listening instead of trying to engage with every single word. When reading English text aloud, I started pronouncing each word properly, which led to the fact that I gradually got accustomed to the speed of native speakers.”

The Change in Moe

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Agree,” but it was “Disagree” on the second questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Very often” to “Often.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Moe wrote, “I had never heard of such things as the flapping rule, a stress-timed language, vowel reduction, liaison, and schwa. Now I listen to English with careful attention to those characteristics of the English language. By reading aloud the same text again and again, I got used to the rhythm of English. I also found it effective to use material on an audio CD because without it, I still would be speaking monotonously, not knowing which words to emphasize.”

The Change in Yukinobu

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Slightly agree,” but it was “Agree” on the second

questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Very often” to “Often.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Yukinobu wrote, “I used to just listen to English nonchalantly, but after learning the characteristics of English sound, I became able to comprehend what I hear better than before. I had thought English is too fast to follow, but after getting some knowledge about the language, I began to think that it is not as difficult as I thought. The knowledge enabled me to read to myself faster. As I became aware of where to read with a stress, I keenly realized that my English was, and still is, far from natural, genuine English. I got really motivated to work on my pronunciation.”

The Change in Ema

In response to questionnaire item 3 (“I do not know how to improve my listening skills”), on the first questionnaire, the answer was “Slightly agree,” but it was “Strongly Disagree” on the second questionnaire. As for questionnaire item 7 (“I translate into Japanese while listening to English”), the answer changed from “Sometimes” to “Rarely.” In the free writing section on the second questionnaire, Ema wrote, “Ever since I learned linking in high school I have been very conscious of it when I speak English. However, I have not been aware of other characteristics of English sounds I learned in this class. If I practice reading aloud keeping those rules in mind, I am sure my English proficiency will improve. After reading the text aloud, I could hear what I could not on the first listening. That was when I realized again that reading silently alone is not good enough to improve my English skills.”

Discussion and Conclusion

It is not surprising that a lot of students admitted anxiety toward listening at the beginning because this study took place in a listening class. What was somewhat surprising was the number of students who had a bad habit of listening; translating English into Japanese in their minds. Nine out of fourteen students very often or often translate English into Japanese when listening with four sometimes doing it. After the three-month course, however, a good many students changed for the better. Without taking this lesson, Meiko, having little confidence in her pronunciation, would still avoid spending her time on improving her listening skills. Luckily, she came to realize that she had lacked the basic knowledge of the English sound system and learned to put the knowledge into practice by reading aloud. Sora, feeling overwhelmed by the speed of English, would still be reluctant to listen to English. However, after getting into the habit of reading aloud at home, the amount of English he can hear in one utterance increased. He is now determined to continue using the new learning strategy, reading aloud. Asako, having very little knowledge of the English phonetics, would still be speaking English with a strong Japanese accent, not knowing any good solution to it. She now understands that she can apply what she learned in class to silent reading. She used to have a bad habit of reading; moving her eyes backwards and forwards trying to translate English word-by-word into Japanese.

It will not be long before she can kick the habit completely. Sayuri, believing that she should stress every single word in a sentence, would still be speaking English that native speakers surely find difficult to understand. The knowledge of a stress-timed language is what motivated her to stamp out the habit and as a result, her listening skill increased to some extent. It is true that it is difficult to determine what it was exactly that prompted their change. Also, even if the newly learned knowledge of phonetics and/or reading aloud training did contribute to students' changing, nobody can tell whether or not they will retain the zeal they have at the moment and treasure the vehicle, reading aloud, from now on. In order to know it, longitudinal research would be necessary with a larger number of participants (probably because this was a first-period class, fewer students than expected showed up in the classroom). That said, there is no denying that there are students whose listening behavior dramatically changed after taking the training. My "advertising" part is over. I hope the students will improve on their learning style by adding to their repertoire of strategies and through trial and error. Things that teachers can do in the classroom are limited. However, we could at least take our students to a lake and provide him/her a fishing rod. Some might not feel like using the particular tool and some might not like the idea of fishing at all, but there will probably be others who find it a way that is right up their alley.

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Appendix

The Questionnaire (translated from Japanese)

Part I

1. I am not good at listening comprehension.

「英語を聴いて理解するのが苦手である。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

2. I lack some basic knowledge of the English sound system to listen to and comprehend English.

「英語を聴き理解するための音の仕組み（発音や強勢）に関する知識が足りていない。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

3. I do not know how I can improve my listening skills.

「どのようにリスニング力を向上させたらよいかわからない。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

4. I incorporate reading-out-loud into my out-of-class learning.

「自宅学習の中で音読を取り入れている。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

5. I am satisfied with my current strategy to improve listening skills.

「リスニング力向上のために現在自分が行っている学習方法に満足している。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

6. I feel that my listening skill will improve through reading aloud training.

「音読はリスニング力向上のために役に立つと思う。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

7. I translate into Japanese while listening to English.

「英語を聴きながら日本語に訳してしまう。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

8. I have a hard time comprehending linked words.

「英語の音の繋がりを聴くのに苦労している。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

9. I cannot catch up with the speed of native speaker speech.

「ネイティブの英語のスピードについていけない。」

Very often Often Sometimes Rarely Never

Part II (Second Questionnaire only)

(Knowledge of Phonetics)

1. How do you find the lecture on “Stress-timed Language”?

「音節一つ一つがリズムを作る日本語とは違い（例：と/り/は/む/し/を/た/べ/ま/す）、英語では、強勢（アクセント）がリズムを作る（例：The Birds will eat the worms. 下線の3単語のみ強く読み、あとは弱く、ササッと読む）」この知識は役に立ちましたか？

Excellent Very Useful Useful Somewhat Useful Not Very Useful

2. How do you find the lecture on “Liaison”?

「子音の次に母音が来た場合、音が繋がる（例：What about an apple? → What about a n apple? わらばらなっぽー）」この知識は役に立ちましたか？

Excellent Very Useful Useful Somewhat Useful Not Very Useful

3. How do you find the lecture on “Schwa”?

「アクセントを受ける母音以外の母音（例：interesting の場合、先頭の i 以外の下線付き母音全て）はあいまいな音（シュワ）になる」この知識は役に立ちましたか？

Excellent Very Useful Useful Somewhat Useful Not Very Useful

4. How do you find the lecture on “the Flapping Rule”?

「t (又は d) の両脇に母音があり、左側の母音にアクセントがある場合 (例 : water, item, I got it.)、t (d) は r の発音にしてもよい」この知識は役に立ちましたか？

Excellent Very Useful Useful Somewhat Useful Not Very Useful

5. How do you find the lecture on “Content Words and Function Words”?

「内容語 (名詞、動詞、副詞、形容詞などの単語) は強く発音し、機能語 (強勢を受けない前置詞、接続詞、助動詞、冠詞などの単語) は弱く発音する」この知識は役に立ちましたか？

Excellent Very Useful Useful Somewhat Useful Not Very Useful

(Listening skill)

6. I feel that my listening skill improved through lectures on the English sound system.

「英語の音の仕組みについての講義を受けて、リスニング力が向上したと思う。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

7. I feel that my listening skill improved through reading aloud.

「音読をしてみて、リスニング力が向上したと思う。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

(motivation)

8. I got motivated to improve my listening skill through lectures on the English sound system.

「英語の音の仕組みについての講義を受けて、リスニング力向上のためのやる気が出た。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

9. I got motivated to improve my listening skill through reading aloud.

「音読をしてみて、リスニング力向上のためのやる気が出た。」

Strongly agree Agree Slightly agree Disagree Strongly disagree

～ Free Writing 自由記述～

1. 英語の特徴に関する知識 (flapping rule, stress-timed Language, vowel reduction, 強く読む単語弱く読む単語の区別, liaison, schwa etc …) を習って、どのような変化がありましたか? 具体的にお書き下さい。

Have you noticed any changes in yourself after learning phonetic knowledge of English such as flapping rule, the rhythm of a stress-timed language, vowel reduction, stressing content words and de-stressing function words, liaison, schwa and so on?

2. 音読をしてみて、どのような変化がありましたか? 具体的にお書き下さい。

Have you noticed any changes in yourself after reading aloud?

ご協力ありがとうございました。Thank you very much for your cooperation.