

Input for Acquisition: Listening Activities that Promote Fluency in Discussions

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the design and implementation of a guided-listening activity for English language students in a small-group discussion class. Drawing on principles of language learning and acquisition that speak to the value of language input, the activity was intended to help students do two things: to generate content for a subsequent discussion, and to consolidate their use and understanding of functional discussion skills. The students for whom this activity was designed were first-year students at a Japanese university beginning their second semester of classes. As well as discussing the learning context and the principles that support this activity, there is a description of how the activity was delivered in each class. There is also a consideration of how it can be delivered to better target students with different levels of proficiency. Finally, there is a review of student responses to a survey about the activity.

INTRODUCTION

The Center for English Discussion Class (EDC) at Rikkyo University operates small-group discussion classes for all its first-year students. In these classes, students are introduced to a variety of contemporary topics and a suite of functional discussion and communication skills that facilitate their discussion. As the classes are small, comprised of no more than nine students, each student has the opportunity to learn, practice, and use the skills while discussing each topic in their weekly one-hundred-minute lesson. In the context of an EDC classroom, discussions are defined as the extended exchange of ideas on a single topic for 16 minutes between three or four participants (Hurling, 2012). Students therefore practice such discussion skills as giving and asking for opinions and giving and asking for reasons and examples to help them in this exchange of ideas. These are introduced as sentence stems like “In my opinion...” and “It’s mainly because...” or as whole formulaic chunks like “Can you give me an example?” The most important aspect of language development at EDC is the development of fluency, the knowledge of how to do something with the language, and to communicate meaningfully in real time (Hurling, 2012). The course is based on a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach in which learners can focus on the rules of the language and discursive strategies, while having ample opportunity to communicate meaningfully in a less-structured context (Hurling S. , 2012). Typically, instructors at EDC follow a unified syllabus in which the aims for each lesson are designated by the Center, as well as the timing and nature of each lesson stage. However, instructors in their second year of employment are encouraged to design and implement an original activity that will help EDC students to improve their performance in class (Center for English Discussion Class, 2019). Thus, the present listening activity was intended to satisfy both the aims of the discussion course at EDC, and to reflect the communicative principles on which it is based.

The activity outlined in this paper was delivered as a pre-discussion preparation task. For each class at EDC, students complete a series of interrelated tasks in which the lesson’s topic is introduced by means of a pre-class reading and an in-class fluency exercise, and the target language is introduced during an in-class presentation and then practiced in a controlled activity. Following these stages, the students are ready for the first of two extended discussions. This is the stage in which the guided-listening activity was presented. Prior to each lesson, an original audio recording had been written and produced by the author with assistance from four EDC colleagues. In each recording, four speakers discuss a topic question, giving genuine responses using that

week's functional target language. They also combine this language with previously taught discussion skills. Each recorded discussion was about one minute and thirty seconds and, when combined with pre- and post-listening tasks, the whole activity lasted between eight to ten minutes. It was primarily aimed at Level III and Level II students who had combined listening and reading scores on the TOEIC test ranging from 280 to 679. The intention behind the creation of this activity was twofold: it was designed to present students with possible speaking points for the subsequent discussion, and to give them further input that helped them use not only that lesson's target language, but demonstrated how it could be used in concert with previously learnt items.

DISCUSSION

When presented with the challenge of designing and implementing an original activity for EDC, two main concerns were paramount: that the activity met the expectations and requirements of the course in which it was based, and that it was founded on sound principles related to second language acquisition. As lessons at EDC are primarily about fluency development and the ability to communicate meaningfully in real time (Hurling S. , 2012), it stood to reason that the activity should help students meet these course aims. The curriculum and context are important variables to consider when designing any classroom activity, and it was important therefore to keep these objectives in mind throughout the design and implementation process (Howard & Major, 2004). The discussion course operated by EDC is representative of Dörnyei's (2009) principled communicative approach in that it integrates meaningful communication with relevant declarative input and the automatization of linguistic rules and lexical items. Therefore, if fluency and automatization are course goals, it becomes necessary for students to develop their implicit knowledge of the target language items, which in turn requires the comprehension of language input (Dörnyei, 2009). The present activity therefore was designed to support students in this regard, with a particular focus on the *language exposure principle* described by Dörnyei (2009) in which he states that second-language students require input that feeds their implicit learning mechanisms, and pre-task activities that prime them for maximum *intake*. Intake, as defined by Van Patten and Cadierno (1993) is that part of the input that students attend to, or are exposed to, which works on their internal learning mechanisms and becomes available for language acquisition. Acquisition occurs as a result of *input processing*, which begins with learners making appropriate form-meaning connections during the act of comprehending input (Van Patten, 2003). The initial idea for a guided-listening activity was developed with these considerations in mind. In terms of second language acquisition principles therefore, the *language exposure principle* and the *input processing principle* figured prominently in the development of the activity presented here, as it was thought that these were relevant in an EDC context.

As students are expected to speak at length during two timed discussions, the first being 12 minutes and the second being 16 minutes, it is important that they are well prepared and given every opportunity to complete the task successfully. In accordance with the aims of the EDC program, the preparation stage should allow students time to generate ideas on the topic and become familiar with required vocabulary, while maximizing student-to-student interaction (Center for English Discussion Class, 2019). Typically, this involves students making value judgments about a list of ideas related to the discussion question and sharing those judgments and ideas with a speaking partner. For example, in Lesson 4, students are asked to consider the question "What are some good ways to improve English skills?" (Fearn-Wannan, Kita, Sturges, & Young, 2019), and presented with eight ideas that include having foreign friends, using social media, or going to an English conversation school. They are then asked whether these options are effective or not effective and to discuss this with their partner. The preparation stage allows the students to focus on the topic of the discussion without the added cognitive load of producing the target

language simultaneously. Moreover, this preparation is valuable because they receive interactive, meaningful input, and it activates their schemata, the pre-existing knowledge that students have about the topic (Harmer, 2007). The proposed alternative activity described in this paper does not mean to replace this input or preparation, or to suggest that it is lacking in some way. Students will still receive interactive, meaningful input in other stages of the lesson prior to and after this activity, as well as during the discussion itself. Therefore, it is thought that the alternative adds variety to the type and nature of input that EDC students are exposed to during their lesson, and that it has some additional benefits.

Firstly, the guided-listening activity clearly relates the form of the target language to the content of the subsequent discussion. For example, in Lesson 4 (Appendix A) in which students will discuss ways to improve their English skills, they can hear that unit's target language (Connecting Ideas and Closing Topics) being used to present the content of the textbook preparation activity. In this way, students are focused not only on comprehending the messages contained in the activity but are also being exposed to further language input. *Flooding* the students with input containing the relevant target language can aid their acquisition of those items (Wong, 2005) by making it easier for them to make form-meaning connections (Van Patten, 2003). If, for example, they hear a speaker repeat or recast the ideas mentioned by a previous speaker by using the Connecting Ideas target language ("I agree with you, as you said...") it should enhance their understanding of how and when to use that language meaningfully. Furthermore, students can hear how that unit's target language can be combined with previously learned language items in a broader discursive framework. The example given here in Appendix A includes exemplars of Giving and Asking for Opinions and Reasons, Checking Understanding, and Paraphrasing, all language items that students had practiced in the previous semester. This satisfies Dörnyei's (2009) *language exposure principle* in which students require repeated and extensive amounts of input in the classroom to compensate for the fact that in a foreign language learning context they do not receive sufficient amounts of input outside of the classroom.

The second main benefit of the alternative discussion preparation activity relates to having students receive the content aurally instead of reading prompts in a textbook. Written texts do not provide a suitable basis for developing the ability to process real-time authentic discourse (Richards, 2008) and research has suggested that reading and listening have different paths to comprehension (Brown, 2017). Listening to content related to the activity can help prime the student's aural receptive skills for hearing them later in the discussion, thus facilitating their comprehension and the extent to which the subsequent input from their classmates can be converted to intake (Van Patten & Cadierno, 1993). Moreover, by hearing the input instead of reading it, students will understand that spoken discourse differs considerably from written discourse. Spoken English contains hesitations and fillers, false starts, and contractions of forms among other unique elements (Richards, 2008). If students are expected to produce spoken discourse, then it makes sense to expose them to relevant examples. Importantly, too, students can be exposed to the pronunciation and intonation of unfamiliar vocabulary items by hearing them spoken by native and expert speakers of the language. Receptive skills and productive skills feed off each other and what students hear will heavily influence what they are capable of producing (Harmer, 2007). By arranging four speakers to discuss the topic, using both functional and lexical items that the students are expected to use, the listening activity provides students with a model of the discussion. Modelling enables students to become familiar with the conventions of the discussion format and to draw on this exposure when completing the activity themselves (Harmer, 2007). This may be especially beneficial for lower-level students who lack confidence in their own ability to complete difficult tasks.

The final benefit of this original listening activity relates to its actual production and the influence this can have on students. Students have a positive attitude toward texts that have been produced for them, and appreciate the effort that has gone into their production (Howard & Major, 2004). Such good will can be valuable in fostering a positive learning environment and motivate students to perform at their highest level. Moreover, producing an activity for a specific course and with a specific set of students in mind, means that the activity is customized and personal. Dörnyei (2009) notes that personalising a lesson's content is one of the basic tenets of a student-centred communicative teaching approach. While the material may not necessarily appeal to each student's personal interests, it is personal in the sense that it is relevant to their specific learning needs and environment. The extent to which the activity has been produced specifically for that context thus makes it an appropriate and appealing challenge. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, this listening activity has been designed with a specific context and specific principles in mind. It is hoped that it is sufficiently representative of each of these elements.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

Making an original listening activity requires careful planning and implementation. In terms of recording the language, there were three main considerations: the speakers, the authenticity of the text, and its comprehensibility. It was decided that the students should be exposed to a variety of voices and accents as this is one of the main advantages of using recorded material (Harmer, 2007). The recordings produced here therefore contained examples of British, North American, and New Zealand English. In regards to authenticity, the speakers chose their own, genuine responses to the question, and although the language used was *roughly-tuned*—meaning that it was simplified and adjusted for the level of the students (Van Patten, 2003)—it could still be considered authentic as it was not unrecognisable in style and construction from the language that students would encounter in a more natural environment (Harmer, 2007). This raises the idea of comprehensibility. Krashen (1985) emphasized the importance of comprehensible input in regards to language acquisition, believing that it was a primary factor in helping second language learners acquire language items. This idea is supported by Van Patten (2003) who claims that students will not be able to make the necessary form-meaning connections, and thus develop their implicit knowledge of the language, if the input cannot be understood. Moreover, it is important as a motivating factor that the activity not be too far beyond the reach of students and that it is in fact achievable (Harmer, 2007). These were the primary concerns regarding the language input in the preparation phase.

In terms of being able to actually deliver recorded material to students, it would seem like it has never been easier. In theory, a teacher could do so armed with no more than a smartphone, a few colleagues, and some free time. In truth, however, an hour was scheduled on three occasions throughout the semester with four co-workers who generously gave up their time to assist with this project. Two dialogues were roughly planned and recorded during each session. The discussions were recorded on a portable MP3 recorder, edited to adjust for sound-levels and length using Audacity, an open-source and free editing software, and then presented using a laptop and a Bluetooth speaker. As not all classrooms have the same audio-visual capabilities, it was important to have portable devices to be able to play the material even in rooms that had no equipment. Worksheets that contained pre-listening, listening, and post-listening tasks were produced (Appendix B) and printed for distribution prior to each lesson.

Implementation

This activity was conducted over a six-week period, beginning in Lesson 2 of the fall semester and continued until Lesson 7, though not in Lesson 5 as this was a test lesson. A variety of topics

were covered, as were a number of functional discussion skills. The activity was refined and evolved over this period, and noticeable changes to the format or task are noted in the Variations section of this paper. As mentioned, for each one of these lessons, this activity was used as preparation for the first of two extended discussions. Prior to this lesson stage the students had discussed that lesson's topic in a fluency exercise, been presented with that week's target language, and practiced the language in a controlled activity. Therefore, the students should have been familiar with the topic and had been introduced to the language before starting the following activities. Lesson 4, the topic for which was English in the World, will continue to be used as the model for illustrative purposes.

Pre-listening

Students were paired, given worksheets, and asked to think of four effective ways to improve their English and write them down. Students were asked to close their textbooks and then given two minutes to think of and write down their own ideas. This kind of challenge is described by Richards (2008) as a *top-down processing* task. It requires the students to use their knowledge and experience of learning English to produce a list of things that they thought were effective, and to listen to see if any of their ideas were mentioned in the following activity. Schema activation is well recognized as being very beneficial in pre-listening activities as it assists students in the act of comprehension (Brown, 2017; Harmer, 2007; Ur, 1996). After two minutes, the teacher asked each group to share in plenary one idea that they had generated so that the other groups could potentially hear more ideas to add to their own lists.

Listening

The students were then told that they would hear four people talking about the same topic, and they were to write down the speaker's responses. Pictures of the four speakers were shown on a screen in relation to their speaking position so that it was easier to see who was speaking when. The same pictures were printed on their worksheets and there was space for them to record their answers. They were then played the one minute and thirty second dialogue. After this first listening, students were asked to share their answers with their original partner and to help each other with any missing information. This is an important stage of the activity. Research has shown that students can experience a great deal of anxiety in regards to their listening comprehension (Brown, 2017), so giving them this opportunity to check their answers in relative privacy with a partner is a good idea before asking them to share their responses with the whole class. The teacher then asked students to volunteer answers regarding each speaker's response and clarified any problems and confirmed correct answers. While playing the audio once has the benefit of more accurately reflecting real life interactions (Ur, 1996), there is good reason to replay it, as students will get more benefit from the activity and understand more than they did previously (Harmer, 2007). With this in mind, the dialogue was played again so that students could confirm what they had heard or notice what they had missed the first time.

Post-listening

Finally, students were asked to consider two questions "Whose opinion do you agree with?" and "Do you disagree with anyone?". These questions were worded to match one of the lesson's target discussions skills: Connecting Ideas. This provided students with the opportunity to use the target language, for example "What do you think of (name's) idea?" or "I agree with (name)". This kind of restructuring activity, in which the student has to incorporate the target linguistic item into their own language repertoire, is important if the listening activity as a whole is to aid the student's acquisition of the item (Richards, 2008). Thus, post-listening tasks that offer students the

opportunity to restructure their ideas in this way can be especially useful. In total, this activity usually took between eight and ten minutes to complete. Though longer than the original textbook preparation, it is suggested in this paper that it is an advantageous use of class time. The students, now having heard four different responses to the topic question as well as generating their own ideas, having been exposed to multiple instances of the target language, and having had opportunities to incorporate it into their own output, were hopefully primed for the first discussion.

VARIATIONS

Lower proficiency classes

As mentioned, this activity was aimed at both Level III and Level II students. Given the considerable difference in their combined TOEIC score (ranging from 280 to 679) it was not surprising that some Level III students at the lower end of this band struggled to correctly identify some of the speaker's responses to the questions in Lessons 2 and 3. This may have been due to some issues with their *bottom-up processing*, their ability to distinguish individual sounds and words within the stream of speech (Richards, 2008). Consequently, it was decided that from Lesson 4 onwards it would be beneficial if they received some extra support in the form of two written responses to choose from next to each of the speaker's names and pictures on the worksheet (Appendix B). This gave them a greater chance of success as it enabled them to read some of the key vocabulary before listening to the dialogue. It was observed thereafter that such students had more success in completing the activity as a result.

Higher proficiency classes

Level I (combined TOEIC score above 680) students at Rikkyo students were also presented with the recorded material. However, the nature of the task differed significantly for these groups. As students with good listening skills, it was thought it would not be a challenge to identify the answers, nor would it be as good a preparation for a discussion compared with lower levels. At EDC, Level I students typically demonstrate a relative familiarity with the target language each week and use each new skill without as much effort as lower level students. As the aim of the activity was to promote acquisition, it was felt that they did not require additional exposure to the input to assist them in making important form-meaning connections. Therefore, the recording was used as a way to introduce the new target language in the presentation stage of the lesson. Having completed the fluency exercise that begins each lesson, the students were told that they would hear a discussion and asked if they could identify any new language items and to speculate about what that lesson's target language would be. This *inductive approach* is appropriate for advanced learners who have more linguistic resources available to them and it can be useful in helping them revise lexical items they are already familiar with (Harmer, 2007). The students were good at identifying each new skill and it was a novel way of presenting each week's target language.

STUDENT SURVEY

To ascertain whether Level III and Level II students found the listening activity to be beneficial, they were asked to complete a survey (Appendix C) and data was collected to establish the nature of their perceptions. Participants (n=72) were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with six statements regarding the listening activity. In order to comply with sound surveying principles, each questionnaire item was related to the main activity but drew on slightly different aspects of it (Dörnyei & Csizér, 2012). Students indicated their responses on a five-point Likert scale in which five represents *strongly agree* and one represents *strongly disagree*. Question one asked how easy it was to understand the listening activity and students responded favorably with a mean response of 4.25. This is important considering the input must be comprehensible if

there is to be any follow-on effect in regard to developing their implicit knowledge and subsequent acquisition of the language item. The following two questions asked students whether the listening activity helped them to use (Q2) and understand (Q3) the target functional items. In each case (Q2 mean=4.46 and Q3 mean=4.29) there was a strong endorsement of the activity's efficacy in this regard. As consolidating their use of these items was one of the main aims of the activity, it was important to receive a positive response. The next two questions focused on the other main aim, thinking about the topic and generating content, and the students were asked whether the activity helped them understand the topic (Q4) and if it helped them develop ideas (Q5) to discuss. Once again, they indicated that it was very useful (Q4 mean=4.37 and Q5 mean=4.22). Finally, as the activity was implemented in the discussion preparation stage of the lesson, it was of course important to ascertain if the students felt that it served its purpose as preparation for the discussion (Q6), and the response (mean=4.43) indicates that the students felt it was. The results were very positive and suggest that the students felt it was an effective use of their class time. It was pleasing to receive such a strong endorsement from the students in terms of the activity's perceived value.

CONCLUSION

The intention behind the design and implementation of this activity was to help students at EDC participate in small-group discussions. To do this, they developed content to share with their classmates and were given an opportunity to consolidate their use and understanding of the target language. It has been argued that by increasing the amount and variety of exposure students had to comprehensible and meaningful input, they were able to make the necessary form-meaning connections that would aid their acquisition of the target items. The students responded positively to the activity, both in terms of their observable classroom behavior and by their responses to a brief survey. A more thorough and analytical study would be required, however, to ascertain whether exposure to the recorded material does in fact lead to more desirable learning outcomes and better performance in terms of acquiring the target language. Moreover, it would be instructive to get some qualitative feedback from the students to understand more clearly how they felt the material was beneficial. These considerations present themselves as avenues of future inquiry.

In the upcoming semester, the activity described here will be delivered again to new first-year students, this time in their first semester. As this paper has focused on how students in their second semester responded to the listening activity, it is expected that there will be some differences between the groups. It is hoped that this activity will be even more beneficial to students who will be less familiar with the requirements of the course. An activity that provides them with a clear model of expected discursive behavior could prove very useful. Moreover, as it became clear that there was some variation in the way that Level III and Level II students were able to negotiate the demands of the task, it would seem appropriate to consider producing more variations of the recorded material that better target students in different levels. More challenging material could be produced for Level I students, too. In any case, this paper hopes to be the first stage of an ongoing investigation into the role that input can have in the development of fluent output and the acquisition of language items in the given teaching context.

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APPENDIX A – Listening activity transcript – Lesson 4 English in the World

Speaker 1	Okay, so, ah, (.) what are some good way to improve your English skills? Hmm, I think for writing in English↑ social media could be good. Ah, for example, ah, it's fun and you can make new friends ↑. Do you agree with me?
Speaker 2	A:h I agree with yo:u, as you said, making new friends, especially foreign friends is go:od. Ahm, this is also good for improving your speaking skills to:o, ah one reason is because you can talk about your interest with your friends, ah, do you follow me?
Speaker 3	Yes, a:h, do you mean you can improve your English by having fun?
Speaker 2	Yeah, that's right.
Speaker 3	O:h, I see. I agree with you. I also think that going to conversation school:I is a good way to improve your speaking (.) It's because the teachers can help you when you have questions. What do you think?
Speaker 4	Ah, yeah, I totally agree with you. Um, as you said, ah, the teachers can help us at an English conversation school so I think it is the best way to improve my speaking as well (.) A:h, for example I can also make many new friends at English conversation school a:nd I can meet many interesting teachers. Um, is there anything to add?
Speaker 1	Hm [m, no]
Speaker 2	[No:o]
Speaker 4	Okay. So:o, some of us think tha:t, um, talking to friends on social media is a good way to improve English, but, ah some of us think that an English conversation school is the best way to improve English skills

APPENDIX B – Worksheet – Lesson 4 (Additions for Level 3 underlined)

Listening Activity

Part One

With a partner, think of four ways to improve your English ability.

-
-
-
-

Part Two

Listen to four Rikkyo teachers talking about the topic. Write their answers.

Debbie



Using social media in English OR writing a diary in English

Reason: _____

Sayaka

Having foreign friends OR Watching English TV shows or movies

Reason: _____

Sayaka



Tim



Going to an English conversation school OR Listening to English music

Reason: _____

Alex x

Reading English books OR Going to an English conversation school

Reason: _____

Alex



Part Three

Whose opinion do you agree with?

Do you disagree with anyone? How come?

APPENDIX C – Student Survey

Fall 2019 Listening Activity – Group Dialogue

Please read the following questions about the group dialogues you listened to this semester and choose one of the answers for each. Thank you for your participation and cooperation.

Strongly agree	非常にそう思う
Agree	そう思う
Neutral	どちらでもない
Disagree	そう思わない
Strongly disagree	全くそう思わない

1. The listening activity was easy to understand. リスニングアクティビティはわかりやすかった。

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

2. The listening activity helped me understand the new discussion skills. リスニングアクティビティは新しいディスカッションスキルを理解するのに役立った。

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

3. The listening activity helped me use the new discussion skills. リスニングアクティビティは新しいディスカッションスキルを使うのに役立った。

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

4. The listening activity helped me understand the discussion topic. リスニングアクティビティはディスカッションのトピックについて分かるのに役立った。

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

5. The listening activity helped me develop ideas about the topic. リスニングアクティビティはアイデアを深めるのに役立った。

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree

6. The listening activity helped me prepare for the discussion. リスニングアクティビティはディスカッションの準備に役立った。

Strongly agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly disagree