

# An Investigation into the Benefits of Using Authentic Listening Material in the Language Classroom

John H. Anderson and Andrew Gorringe

## Introduction

The object of this research was to determine whether exposing students to authentic listening material was more effective than non-authentic material in developing listening competence. The background to this study stems from the fact that a lot of published listening material is not characteristic of real life listening;<sup>1</sup> texts are often produced in order to fit into a syllabus, where, according to Anderson and Lynch, linguistic structures or functions are to be learnt one after another in a predefined sequence.<sup>2</sup> Consequently students are often exposed to non-authentic listening texts supposedly graded to their ability. However, as Underwood writes “Students working with non-authentic material are led into false expectations about what will occur in the ordinary spoken language which they will wish to understand.”<sup>3</sup> These “false expectations”, and the dis-

---

<sup>1</sup> P. Ur, *Teaching Listening Comprehension* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> A. Anderson and T. Lynch, *Listening* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 80.

<sup>3</sup> M. Underwood, *Teaching Listening* (London: Longman, 1989), p. 99.

crepancy between what students have learned and what actually transpires in authentic discourse, means that students who are only exposed to such texts will not be sufficiently prepared for real life encounters. Authentic texts in this study were defined as texts which had been "... produced in response to real life communicative needs ...",<sup>4</sup> that is texts taken from real life situations, and non-authentic texts were defined as any texts which had been artificially produced and were an imitation of real life texts.

Listening, as Rost describes, "is essentially an inferential process based on perception of cues ...",<sup>5</sup> and it is our assumption that this occurs regardless of the nature of the text. Whether authentic or non-authentic, this process actually involves two "complimentary" processes: "bottom up", where the message is processed at successive levels (i. e. from sounds to words to clauses etc.) and "top down", where one's background knowledge or "schema" aids one's comprehension.<sup>6</sup> The two groups in this study were exposed to taped monologues and dialogues covering the same topic areas. The only difference was that for one group authentic texts were used and for the other non-authentic.

---

<sup>4</sup> D. Forman, "Factors affecting the choice of relevant listening material for Malaysian students planning to study at English medium institutes of higher education overseas", *Unpublished M Ed thesis, University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology, Cardiff*. Cited in M. Underwood (1989), p. 98.

<sup>5</sup> M. Rost, *Listening in Language Learning* (London: Longman, 1990), p. 33.

<sup>6</sup> J. C. Richards, "Real World Listening in the Japanese Classroom", In P. Wadden (Ed.), *A Handbook for Teaching at Japanese Colleges and Universities*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 52.

## Method

### Subjects

The subjects (N=39) in this study were female undergraduate students in their first or second year at Kwassui Women's College. They were English language and literature majors and had been studying English for a total of 6–7 years since entering Junior High School. Despite this length of study the majority of the students, like most Japanese college students, had either not been taught listening or were taught it in a way which according to Richards "... does not adequately prepare them for real-world listening...".<sup>7</sup> They were native Japanese speakers and volunteered to take extra listening classes. The subjects were randomly assigned to two groups; group A (those exposed to authentic listening) and group B (those exposed to non-authentic listening). Prior to the classes the TOEFL practice listening test 1 (ETS)<sup>8</sup> was administered and, by using an independent samples t-test, it was found that there was no significant difference in ability between the two groups.

### Materials

Group A was presented with authentic material taken from live radio broadcasts and group B was presented with listening material from various commercially available textbooks. The topics covered in the texts were the same for each group and the exercises in each

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> *TOEFL Practice Tests*, (Princeton, N. J.: Education Testing Services, 1995). Used by permission of Educational Testing Service. For research purposes only.

class followed a similar procedure. First there was some pre-listening work to accustom the students to the topic. Next the students were given time to look over the questions and then the material was played. In pairs the students answered the questions and the material was played again. The answers were then given and the tapes played a final time.

### Procedure

Over a period of fourteen weeks, the students met for twelve hourly sessions and were exposed to the materials described above. The two teachers involved in the study worked with both groups alternating every two weeks. At the end of the semester the students were given the TOEFL practice listening test 2 (ETS).<sup>9</sup>

### Analyses

After the TOEFL test had been administered and marked, an independent samples t-test and a matched t-test were used to see if there was any difference in performance between the groups. It was found that there was no significant difference in performance between the groups but that there was a significant difference between group A's performance on the second test and its performance on the first.

---

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

## Results

	Group A		Group B	
	Test 1	Test 2	Test 1	Test 2
Test-takers (N)	22	22	17	17
Total Items (n)	50	50	50	50
Mean (X)	19.045	21.181	19.824	19.294
Mode	22	23	23	18, 19, 20, 24
Median	20	22	19	19
Mid-point	18	21	25.500	23
Low-high	8-28	15-27	12-39	8-38
Range	20	12	27	30
SD	5.066	3.527	6.993	7.042

Using a matched t-test on each groups' scores on test 1 and 2 it was found that there was a significant improvement in group A's scores on test 2 ( $t$  (obs) 2.183,  $t$  critical 2.080 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), 21 degrees of freedom), but not group B's ( $t$  (obs) 0.380,  $t$  critical 2.120 ( $p \leq 0.005$ ), 16 degrees of freedom).

## Discussion

### Variables

In this research the dependent variable was performance as measured by the scores on the TOEFL practice listening tests. The independent variable was a program of teaching using authentic and non-authentic listening tests. Authentic texts were those recorded from real-life situations and they had the following characteristics:

- natural rhythm
- natural intonation
- natural pronunciation
- some overlap between speakers
- normal rate of delivery
- relatively unstructured language, which is used spontaneously in speech
- incomplete sentences, false starts, hesitations
- background noises, and, sometimes, background voices
- natural starts and stops
- less densely packed information than in written language<sup>10</sup>

Non-authentic texts were defined as texts which had been artificially produced and were an imitation of real life situations and had some, if not all, of the following characteristics:

- unnatural rhythm
- unnatural intonation
- over-clear enunciation
- little overlap between speakers
- slow (and perhaps monotonous) delivery
- structured language which was meant to be read silently rather than spoken aloud
- complete sentences as utterances
- no background noise

---

<sup>10</sup> M. Underwood, p. 100.

- artificial stops and starts
- densely packed information<sup>11</sup>

Although authentic texts are not necessarily more difficult than non-authentic texts, in this study this proved to be the case. In fact they were far more challenging than the non-authentic because many of the students had had limited exposure to native speakers conversing and had rarely listened to authentic real world texts. Obviously great care was then taken with presentation of the texts and careful thought put into the grading of the tasks. Even though students were unable to comprehend some parts of the texts they were still able to perform the tasks. The non-authentic texts were taken from various textbooks which are currently in wide use and like most non-authentic texts can be criticised for not being representative of real life listening.<sup>12</sup>

The students were randomly assigned to each group and the groups tested initially to determine whether there was any difference between the two. No significant difference was found. Because the two groups were randomly divided it is felt that any other variables would have been controlled. The students were exposed to each teacher for exactly the same amount of time and the procedure for each text was the same, ruling out possible differences due to teacher effect. The places where the classes took place were as similar as possible; each room was about the same size, in the same building and had the same acoustic system.

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> P. Ur, p. 10.

## Results

The result of an independent samples t-test on the scores for the two groups on the second test showed no statistical difference between the groups, however, there is a slight difference in performance by group A on the second TOEFL test. The mean score has gone up from 19.045 to 21.181 and the standard deviation has gone from 5.066 to 3.527, and this was found to be significant using a matched t-test, with a  $t$  (obs) of 2.183 being slightly greater than the  $t$  critical of 2.080 ( $p \leq 0.05$ ), 21 degrees of freedom. With group B, however, there is virtually no change, with the mean at 19.824 and 19.294 and the standard deviation at 6.993 and 7.042.

The slight difference between the two groups' performance on the TOEFL could have occurred for the following reasons. To begin with, because the texts used in group A were more challenging to the students, this may have boosted their motivation to learn and to make an effort in the class. Conversely with group B the opposite may have happened. The lack of challenge may have resulted in a lack of motivation. In addition, although the texts used with group B may have been less difficult, the tasks set were often more difficult than the tasks set for group A's texts. Furthermore, the teachers may have unwittingly put more effort into group A's class and hence, increased the students' effort and thus performance. Also the scores on the TOEFL were rather low and consequently any inference about the students' performance on the test and thus their listening ability may not be valid. Finally the difference could have occurred because authentic texts are more beneficial to students than non-authentic tex-



ts, because they better prepare students for real life encounters. Students are conditioned to be able to listen to authentic speech more effectively, by not listening to understand everything, but rather by inferring meaning using the competence they have.

### **Conclusion**

In this research we set out to determine whether students who were exposed to authentic listening texts performed better than those exposed to non-authentic texts. Although there was a slight improvement in the mean scores on the TOEFL of those who were exposed to the authentic texts we could find no meaningful statistical difference between the groups. This research therefore does not provide conclusive evidence that using purely authentic texts can lead to improved listening performance, but it does provide a blueprint for further research. It also represents an invitation to teachers to consider using more authentic listening material in their classes. We suggest, therefore, that other studies should be made which are for a greater period of time, with students of a wider ability range and with a greater variety of texts. Such studies may prove the efficacy of using authentic texts in the classroom as opposed to the current widespread use of non-authentic listening texts.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to thank Educational Testing Service for granting permission to administer listening sections from the *TOEFL*

*Practice Tests* (1995). We would also like to express our gratitude to the following publishers for allowing us to use the audio tapes and written sections from their work: Cambridge University Press (*Listening 2* by Doff and Becket), Macmillan Language House (*Alltalk 1*, *Alltalk 2* by David Peaty) and Prentice Hall Regents (*Authentic Listening and Discussion for Advanced Students* by Jayne Gaunt Leshinsky).

Received January 16, 1998