

Ring the Bell—It's Time for EL!

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Most teachers in Japan are now familiar with extensive reading (ER), but the majority seem unaware of her long-lost or forgotten sister, extensive listening (EL). However, there have been some efforts made to revive her, and several presentations on EL were given at JALT 2003. Since then, both a website and an email discussion board have been created.¹

However, there are still many unanswered questions about the nature of EL. This paper will discuss the What, Why and How of EL.

What is EL? And why bother?

What is EL? There is as yet no clear answer to this question because there has as yet to be a proper discussion. To define EL, first we need to see how EL fits in the larger scheme of learning to listen in a foreign language. Many listening activities aim to elicit, or help the learner to notice, a new language feature, or listen for a specific piece of information. This is called Intensive Listening (IL), and it involves listening to shorter and rather difficult listening texts. Other activities help the learner to focus on the global comprehension of longer listening passages, and this is where EL sits.

But in order for learners to be able

to listen for global comprehension, the right kind of listening text is needed. Most listening texts used in classrooms are short and only last a few minutes, or even less, and thus give learners only a small amount of exposure to learn to chunk language into meaningful 'sound bites' and to build their word recognition ability. So in order for students to build up their rate of decoding of text (we could almost say listening speed), they will need to work with easier listening texts where most of the words can be decoded quite easily and with high levels of comprehension. At this level, learners will be able to chunk words and patterns into meaningful units and learn to decode listening input more fluently. If, however, the listening task contains too many words which are unknown, or is on an unfamiliar topic, the listener must either pay more attention to what s/he is listening to, or s/he will have to revert to a 'study mode' kind of listening rather than the fluent listening of EL. Figure 1 summarizes many of the essential differences between Intensive Listening and Extensive Listening.

Both intensive listening and extensive listening are important parts of a balanced curriculum in much the same way as intensive

reading and extensive reading are. Thus, a nascent definition of EL includes: learners listening to massive amounts of easily comprehensible recorded material, on their own, outside of class; they choose what they listen to, and they stop listening if it is not easy and enjoyable; there are few or no follow-up activities; and the recorded material is well within the learner's listening comfort zone.

As with ER, there are many benefits of EL which include:

1. Increased exposure to spoken English—ideally to many varieties;
2. Increased rate of recognition—making sense of what they hear;
3. Increased vocabulary and depth of word knowledge, especially when listening and reading along at the same time;
4. Increased comprehension when listening and reading at the same time;
5. Improved pronunciation skills—both receptively and productively; and
6. Improved listening perseverance.

On the other hand, there are some possible limitations of EL which include:

1. Learners may not realize their progress because fluency gains are

Figure 1. Contrasting Intensive and Extensive Listening²

Intensive	Type of Listening	Extensive
Accuracy	GOAL	Fluency
Listen for details/specific information; Mimic text; Improve and develop listening strategies	PURPOSE	Get general information; Enjoy; Build word recognition ability; Chunking language into meaningful units of sound.
Sounds, words, and pronunciation—linking, connected speech; Notice new language features	FOCUS	Meaning; Global comprehension
Often difficult; Shorter passages; Teacher chooses	MATERIAL	Easy; Longer passages; Learner chooses
Not much	AMOUNT	A lot
Slower	SPEED	Faster
Must finish; Time constraints	METHOD	Stop if don't like; Rewind and Repeat—Listen again and again

Figure 2 : Types of listening according to text difficulty

Text difficulty	Level	What the learner can achieve
Many unknown language items	Noise	The learner is unlikely to pick up much language and is liable to be left feeling frustrated.
A few unknown language items (say 5% unknown)	Instructional	The learner can pick up a few new words but the listening will be a bit difficult.
All the language is known	Fluency building	The learner can recognize words, chunk language, and grasp global meaning quickly and easily.

not always clearly identifiable;

2. It may not be as enjoyable or memorable as reading for some students—partly due to learning styles, but also because we remember much less of what we hear, and we retain much more of the meaning than the exact form;

3. Students may not understand how much time is required to develop their listening.

Choosing the right type and mode for listening

It is essential that the learners select the right type of listening if they wish to learn in the way they want to because each type of listening has its own function. These are summarized in Figure 2.

Thus, we can see students and teachers have to choose the appropriate listening material according to the aim of listening they wish to practice. Research by Waring and Brown (2003) shows that when the aim of EL is to develop language growth (instructional listening), many Japanese learners should listen one level below what learners select for graded reading. However, when the aim is fluency building, appropriate EL materials should be two levels below what learners select for graded reading. They also suggest there are three modes which learners can choose from according to their preference: a) a read-only mode; b) a listen-while-reading mode; and c) a listen-only mode. But whatever level or mode students choose, it is essential that the listening materials are easy and comprehensible for the learner.

How do we incorporate EL into our classes?

A simple first step is to use the audio recordings that accompany some of the graded readers already in many of our libraries/ER programs, or to record our own. It goes without saying that these materials need to be at the appropriate level for free and pleasurable listening—joyful listening!

If possible, EL sets of audio materials and books should be kept together (e.g., in plastic envelopes) so that they can be checked out together. In fact, some readers now have accompanying CDs, making the incorporation of EL into self-access and ER programs very easy indeed. Since the emphasis of EL, like ER, is on pleasurable learning, follow-up activities may be limited to students simply keeping a record of the types of EL they complete and the amount of time they spend doing them along with any notes they wish to make about their endeavors. A sample entry for “Monkey’s Paw” is pro-

Date	5/31
Time	40 mins
What I listened to	Monkey's Paw
Type of Listening	Listening while reading
Notes	I realized the correct pronunciation of 'paw'. This story should not be listened to when you're alone at night!

vided, but of course, this is just one idea for getting started.

In conclusion, while there are still many unanswered questions about extensive listening, many of us in the ER world believe it's time for EL to catch up to speed. Perhaps we can begin by linking two acronyms:

D rop
E verything
A nd
L isten

[to]

H eaps [of]
E asily
A ssessible (both attainable and comprehensible)
R ecordings!

Endnotes

1 See <http://www1.harenet.ne.jp/~waring/el/>. You can subscribe to the Extensive Listening mailing list if you follow the instructions at: <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/extensivelisting/>

2 Adapted from Roberta Welch's chart contrasting intensive and extensive reading in Richard Day and Julian Bamford's *Extensive reading in the second language classroom*. Cambridge University Press, 1998, p. 123.

References

Waring, Rob. (2003). "What is Extensive Listening?" Retrieved May 15, 2004, from <http://www1.harenet.ne.jp/~waring/el/what.htm>.
Waring, Rob, and Ronan Brown. "Researching Extensive Listening." Presentation at JALT Shizuoka, November 24, 2003.