

Critique of a Language-Learning Website

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Listening plays a crucial part in the learning of overseas students in the United Kingdom. Students can never follow a lecture or discussion in English without listening. Traditional classroom teaching in listening limits students' time and space. However, the Web-based listening course accommodates listeners a great deal, enabling them to access the Internet at their own pace. In this paper, the author would like to study on a language learning Website for developing learners' listening skills, designed by the CELE (Centre for English Language Education) at the University of Nottingham. In the first part, the author will review the issues concerning listening, conventional materials design, CALL (computer assisted language learning) and actual Websites established for EAP (English academic purposes). Through analysis, the author would develop a set of evaluation criteria in order to evaluate the CELE listening Website. These guidelines should also be helpful for teachers and students to select suitable online listening materials. By using these criteria and comparing with other Websites for similar purposes, the author would highlight the strengths and weaknesses of the CELE Website and offer suggestions for its improvement. In the last section, the author would consider the generalisability of the Website in respect of design principles, exercise types and tools, to check whether it is appropriate for teaching listening in a specific context and whether it is applicable for creating a parallel site developing reading skills.

Keywords: listening skills, English academic purposes, computer-assisted language learning, reading skills

Reading and Listening Skills

In the literature exploring the teaching of listening, some approaches have presumed that listening is an ability developing naturally through exposure to the language and through practice of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation (Hedge, 2001, pp. 227-228). Such presumption has indeed influenced the teaching of listening skills. The development of these skills, therefore, failed to gain its focus in the classroom.

Findings of recent research into foreign language listening (Vandergrift, 1999; Rost, 2002) indicate that macro-strategies should be used to ensure an effective listening activity. Macro-strategies included listening skills, comprising predicting, inferencing, monitoring, responding, clarifying and evaluating (Lynch, 2004, p. 16). Among these skills, it is thought that predicting, clarifying and evaluating are particularly important. When listening to a foreign language, listeners either use subject knowledge or the content to predict what is going to be said. In the classroom, students are advised to pay special attention to signposts which are helpful for them to go in accordance to the lectures. During the process of listening, it is important for listeners to clarify what they missed or what they did not understand. If they are instructed on how to write notes while listening, it would be easier for them to understand the lectures. When the lesson is over, learners need to assess how well

they have understood it. Therefore, if listeners can practice these skills in combination and master them, listening would be easier to deal with.

Factors Affecting Listening Comprehension

It is significant to know the factors affecting listening comprehension, because they enlighten teachers in developing students' skills for successful listening at any level. Many researchers (Rubin, 1994; Brown, 1995; Ur, 1996; Lynch, 2004) described the number of factors such as speaker, subject and language which might challenge listeners. The factors of speakers are mainly about the person's accent, the clarity of delivery and the speed of the speaking. Subject factors relate to the background knowledge and the familiarity of the topic. Language factors concern the selection of vocabulary and expression.

A number of these difficulties which second-language listeners encounter have implications for the teaching procedures of listening and the design of listening tasks. Underwood (1989) suggested that the three-phase procedure involve pre-, while-, and post-listening stages, and since then, this pedagogy has been widely used in many English language teaching classrooms. Listeners are unfamiliar with the vocabulary or lack of background knowledge of the text may have difficulties in understanding and inferring meaning. Therefore, pre-listening activities are crucial to effective listening. During the pre-listening phase, Ur (1996) suggested that teachers prepared learners for both schematic and language knowledge. The while-listening is an essential stage where learners are actually applying different skills to listening. The post-listening stage is a development of the second phase. Hedge (2001, p. 252) held that activities for this stage could be integrated with other skills through developing the topic into reading, speaking or writing activities. This three-stage approach has now become standard practice dealing with listening texts, helping listeners to solve specific problems and develop particular skills.

Material Design and CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning)

Based on the criteria proposed by Dickinson (1987) and Sheerin (1989) for the design of self-assess materials, McGraft (2002, p. 150) summarized the features that such materials should possess. From the author's view, some of these characteristics, such as explicit purposes, straightforward, instruction and feedback, are also very useful in developing computer-based materials.

Warschauser (1996) described three phrases of CALL, illustrating the development of increasingly using computers in different ways in the area of language learning and teaching. An integrative CALL is the third phase the researchers moving towards. It is marked by the introduction of two important innovations: multimedia and the Internet. Multimedia packages enable listening, speaking, reading and writing to be combined in a single activity. Building on multimedia technology, the Internet enables both asynchronous and synchronous communication to take place between learners and teachers.

With the accessibility and prevalence of the Internet, creating Websites and adding pages to the Internet become available for everyone. The World Wide Web presents and distributes an enormous amount of information to users. To a certain extent, the Internet has also transformed the traditional ways of teaching and learning. Some Websites lack organization, criteria or reliability. Finding worthwhile resources on the World Wide Web has never been easy.

English Learning Websites for Academic Purposes

Then, the author examines a few EAP (English academic purposes) Websites to find out if there are any shared guidelines behind them. English language teaching materials can be reached at <http://www.staff.ncl.ac.uk/r.w.gilmour/ELTMATER/index.html>. It is designed for studying English as a foreign language though all the activities on the Web are listening and reading exercises. Frustratingly, several links seem to be inaccessible. What is worse, the title of the Web is not precise, considering its contents. Nowhere can the author find materials for developing learners speaking and writing skills, since it is named as English language teaching materials. The designer may as well modify the title matching precisely with its contents or complement other activities for developing speaking and writing skills.

Some EAP sites are very disappointing. The Website <http://www.cals.rdg.ac.uk/APILL/index.asp> claims to be a place where students can access and study independently in a variety of languages. Clicking “all languages”, however, reveals that the topic is only an activity for listening to news programmes around the world. At the time of listening, however, it simply offers a couple of links to other listening Websites. Some Websites need improving in their organizations. The Website <http://esl.about.com/is> is one for learning English as a second language. It indeed embraces almost every aspect of the English language but its individual pages are too long; it takes at least 20 mouse clicks just to scroll through the contents of a single page. Hundreds of pages are interlinked which confuses users. Users may not easily find the information they need, though the site provided a content directory on the left of its homepage. By contrast, <http://www.uefap.com/index.htm>, an EAP Website supported by the University of Hertfordshire, presents its contents explicitly and leads users directly to what they locate.

While no agreement has yet been reached on how Web-based learning materials can be judged, a number of different sets of criteria have been posted on the Internet for evaluating learning Websites. Various as these criteria may seem to be, they actually share much in common, taking into consideration authority, purpose, content and currency. As far as the author concerned, accessibility is an essential element of evaluation. If users cannot access the Website, the online resources mean nothing to them, no matter how good they might be. If people are to access language learning Websites, pedagogy should also be a key criterion.

On the basis of the design principles for self-access and Web-based materials mentioned above, the author is going to use the following list to evaluate the online learning materials:

(1) Accessibility—This should be a general criterion for all the online resources. As mentioned before, it would be meaningless if users have no way to access the Websites. In addition, we need to check if there are search engines embedded in Websites and if any specific multimedia formats are required;

(2) Purpose—It is essential that the site states its purposes as clearly as possible and actually fulfills them. The title of each page should be in exact accordance with its contents;

(3) Contents—From the author’s view, contents include 4Cs: credibility, correctness, currency and comprehensiveness. A trustworthy and authoritative source can supply some reliable evidence allowing users to trust it. However, this does not mean that the Websites built up by anonymous authors are not worthwhile, but users might reasonably be suspicious of them. Correctness means that the information on the internet needs to be factual, detailed, and exact. While a very credible writer made a statement that was correct twenty years ago, it may not be correct today. Therefore, currency is another factor we should consider. It indicates whether a site

is being maintained. Comprehensiveness stands for the scope and the depth of the content;

(4) Pedagogy—As far as suitability is concerned, pedagogy should be an indispensable criterion for designing an EAP Website. Not only does it refer to clear instructions and immediate feedbacks, it also includes understanding learners' problems and needs in developing specific language skills, such as predicting and inferencing;

(5) Construction—By construction, the author means how the Website is designed. It is a matter of personal taste. No matter how it is presented to the users, at the very least, the page should be easy to read. For larger sites, an explicit directory might be convenient for users to scan quickly.

By applying these criteria, the author will evaluate the CELE (Centre for English Language Education) Web-based listening module.

Evaluation of the Web-Based Listening Materials of CELE and Suggestions

In this part, the author will give a brief introduction of CELE's online course for developing skills, and then analyze its strengths and weaknesses in regard to accessibility, purpose, content, pedagogy and construction. By comparing this Website with some other sites for similar purposes, the author will consider how it might be extended.

This Website is available at <http://Webct.nottingham.ac.uk/Webct/cobaltMainFrame.doWebct> and is designed to deliver a listening course on the Internet for overseas students. Every student at Nottingham University can access the site easily and freely. The whole module consists of eight lessons, each of which comprises several learning tasks and a self-assessment.

It is easy to access this site and no additional software is required except Java, which can be downloaded free from a given link. All the recordings are ready to load and sound clear, securing a good start for learners.

With regard to purpose, no judgment is easy to make about the value of a site until its goal has been achieved. This online course seems to aim at improving overseas students' listening skills. However, nowhere can the author feel sure about which level the course is designed for and which level the learners are supposed to reach after taking this course. Are learners expected to understand casual conversations or academic lectures or both? If both are targeted, then how should they be weighed in the module? Do they carry the same weight?

On the course content page, it is obvious to notice the disordered content page. This online course seems to develop learners' skills in listening to informal conversations and formal lectures. However, the author does not understand what logic this order of the content relies up on. For example, lessons two and three are about counter services, lessons four and five are about lectures, and lessons seven and eight then go back to daily conversations. Would learners benefit more from the existing lesson schedule? What if the order is rearranged, being group into categories? For the author, they are just mixed together and thrown online. Thus some titles of the content appear to be confusing. Take lesson six "listening to discussion" for example. Are these discussions conducted in academic lessons or casual conversations? There is no need to strictly differentiate the academic lectures from the informal talks, but the contents should be clarified by topics, within which designers could set different levels according to the complexity of the texts. Adult learning activities (<http://www.cdlponline.org/index.cfm>) set a good example by categorizing its topics.

Each unit of the course is composed of several tasks focusing on specific listening skills, such as predicting, clarifying, note-taking and assessing. Learners would make progress if these skills are really

focused. The listening and practice parts for predicting are well-designed, but the skill of clarifying is another case. Take tasks 5 and 6 of lesson one, for example, both of them aim at developing the listening skill for clarifying purpose. After clicking them in, both turn out to be the topics of the texts, instead of teaching clarifying skills. So learners may not master this skill even after they have finished the tasks. In addition, self-assessment in each lesson is machine-patterned. These eight assessment forms are absolutely identical without any focus for each lesson. For instance, the listening skill of note-taking has been planned in lessons four and five, but there is no sample, except the script which learners could locate for comparison. Self-assessment questions in these two units stay the same as those in any other lessons. Feedback, thus, does not work at all.

Further improvement needs to be made in the area of pedagogy. Like Breaking News English at Website <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/index.html>, the three-phase teaching procedure seems to be well-presented. In most of the tasks, there are some short warming-up questions, either based on the text or relevant to the topic of the text. It serves as the pre-listening stage of the lesson, prepares students for the information of the text and activates their prior knowledge. The while-listening topics are very useful for overseas students adapting themselves to a new life and study in Nottingham. As for the post-listening activities, learners are taken into a more intensive phase by completing exercises of right order, contractions, prepositions, articles and dictations. However, most of the pre-listening activities are text-related rather than language-oriented, which misleads learners to believe that it is not necessary to know some key words before listening. Hence, Ur's (1996) suggestion of providing learners with language knowledge before listening is not accurately reflected on the site. If words relevant to the text could be presented in pre-listening phase, listeners would then obtain a better understanding of the text before listening. In addition, the types of after-listening exercises lack variety. Still the author is unable to figure out which level these exercises are designed for and how this Web-based course meets learners' needs for overcoming listening difficulties, such as the speed of delivery, the unfamiliarity of accents, and homonyms. In contrast, the adult learning Website does a better job of enriching learners' knowledge in the relevant field by providing links. Randall's ESL cyber listening lab at Website <http://www.esl-lab.com/>, performs better not only in following a three-stage teaching methodology for listening, but also in classifying the exercises according to levels. In respect of helping students' out-of-listening difficulties, Voice of America even offers special English programmes for immediate listeners at Website <http://www.voanews.com/special-English/in> in which the reporters speak more slowly than normal and use more simple words in reporting. The listening lounge site at Website <http://www.englishlistening.com> shows its advantages in grouping recordings by learners levels as well as the origins of the speakers—native and non-natives.

Generally speaking, the construction of the Web is fine, but it still comes out with flaws. Clicking into each task page, listeners may feel a little confused as they do not know which lesson they are in. Sometimes, the titled words on the top of task page are the same as the title of the task's corresponding lesson; sometimes, the words are the topic of a conversation. For instance, "listening to informal conversation", consists with its lesson title, is on every task page of lesson eight, whilst, "A Weekend in Nottingham", which is the topic of the conversation in lesson six, appears on the title line of each task. What is worse, this problem may mislead users to another puzzle. The topic for task 2 of lesson six is "A Weekend in Nottingham", but users may not be aware that they are "listening to discussions". "A weekend in Nottingham" can either be a topic for lesson seven "using language to be sociable" or lesson eight "listening to informal conversation". Therefore, a lesson marker

on the page would be necessary to remind users of the unit they are studying.

One of the considerations of the CELE Website comes from its inconsistency. It seems to be a purposeful design, but listeners are not allowed to have the audio files delivered simultaneously with scripts until they have finished listening. If the lessons are with several conversations inside, however, all scripts and answers are clicked to be ready, only if listeners complete listening to any one of the conversations. In this case, the designer fails to fulfill the purpose of forcing listeners to concentrate on their first listening without looking at the scripts.

It is suggested that the course focuses on exact levels with corresponding activities. If it is lecture oriented, then the designer could edit more long passages into the course. In order to arouse listeners' greater interest in listening, it is advisable to offer video recordings as well as audio ones (adult learning activities) or some games to vary after-listening activities. It would also be better to apply the certain software, helping users to control the speed of recordings if there is possibility of providing a special service, as Voice of America does for lower-levels.

Conclusions

Overall, the CELE Web-based listening course offers a model for other online lessons, especially of embedding tools such as dictionary and concordancer. However, more efforts are required to clarify its purpose, organize its contents and enrich its exercises, and thus truly satisfying learners' needs for developing listening skills.

Finally, the author will discuss this listening Website in terms of design principles, exercise types and tools, and apply it to the teaching context. In addition, the author will examine whether these criteria are suitable for creating a parallel site, such as the site for developing reading skills.

As it is analyzed before, the revision of the online module mainly lies in its contents and types of exercise. For the author's students, he may include a lesson about pronunciation difference between British English and American English, word stress and sentence rhythm, because they have the possibility of listening to the news from the BBC or Voice of America in their College English Test, in which listening comprehension accounts for 40%. Apart from lessons in practicing listening skills, the author may put a lesson talking about test strategies and prepare a unit of mock tests. The author may also design more types of exercises and specific activities for each unit focusing on particular skills. For instance, when the author adds note-taking skills into a Web course, he would introduce learners to some efficient ways of making notes, such as abbreviations, symbols and spatial layout. Meanwhile, he would attach note-taking samples for reference. He would always bear in mind though while designing, the issue of identifying students' difficulties and meeting their requirements for developing listening skills.

In addition to listening being a receptive skill, reading serves as a passive skill as well. As with listening students need to understand reading processes and three-stage methodology. They also need to master some reading skills, such as skimming, scanning, deducing and summarizing. Therefore, when designers prepare a Web-based reading course, they can take advantage of the similarity that reading shares with listening. For example, dictionary and concordancer are useful tools for both of them. So it is advisable to apply these tools to both Websites. However, because of their differences in presentation, some principles which work well with listening activities might not suit reading exercises. Usually, when people listen to a passage, what they need to do is click the "play" button, whereas for reading practice, much more space is required to guarantee that the passage and its detailed analysis have been clearly presented. In general, no matter what the difference would

be, identifying the students' reading barriers and meeting their needs for improving reading speed and efficiency are of primary importance in designing a Web-based reading course.

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