Do Students Prefer Listening to Texts Read Aloud to them as a Group, or to Audio-books in Solitude Online?

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Introduction

Solitary online learning has become popular in the learning of languages in recent years, given the ease of computer-assisted language learning (CALL). Nevertheless, sometimes students are reluctant to engage in online learning, and indicate that they prefer to learn from a living person who is neither distant from them in time nor space. It is important to address this issue because of the increasingly important role of CALL in language learning in schools and universities. The following study is an investigation of students' perspectives regarding their preferences for solitary listening to audio-books online, or listening to a live reading of stories as a group.

Literature Review

First it is necessary to explain how a live reading may differ from an audio-recording. It is easy to assume that linguistic communication is separate from gestural communication, but in fact, Finnegan reminds us "we regularly draw simultaneously on several modalities" (2002, p. 224). Embodied communication has been the norm for millennia, and it is only since the invention of audio-recordings in the late nineteenth century that the delivery of disembodied voices has been made possible.

Another level on which the two modes of delivery diverge is consistency. An audio-recording is consistent no matter how many times it is played. A live delivery, however, will lack this consistency. Finnegan (2002) alerts us to the variations possible in a live reading, in her anthropological study of the Limba, in "the timing of their delivery, the grouping or separation of their spoken sounds, the deployment of speed, silence, volume, incisiveness, tone and auditory characterisation" (p. 227). We would suggest

that these qualities are also present in the performance of an English story to listeners. Later, Finnegan (2015) explains that "even if we focus only on the auditory dimensions of speech, we have to take account of intonation, tempo, dialect, rhythm, volume, timbre, emphasis and all the near-infinite modulations of the speaking - and singing - voice" (p. 77). The nature of the group will influence these variables. As the teacher reads, she or he will be making eye contact with the listeners, and adjusting her volume, tone and speed according to verbal or non-verbal feedback that she gets from the listeners. The interactive nature of the class necessitates variety in the delivery of the voice that is impossible in an audio-recording.

Another difference between these modes of delivery is emotional engagement. Live interaction may induce a different affective state from online learning. Schumann (1997) argues that "emotion underlies most, if not all, cognition" (p. xv) and extends this argument to success in second language acquisition: "variable success in second language acquisition (SLA) is emotionally driven" (p. xv). The relationships between the teacher and the class, and the class members with each other, may impact the level of emotional engagement with the text, and thus learning.

Van Manen (2015) is concerned about the possible detrimental impact of having young children, who are able readers, spend their time reading alone, rather than engaging in conversation. He considers the skills learnt in conversation, such as "turn-taking, argument, conversational relations, expressivity" (p. 48) to also be important, besides the skills that are acquired from reading. Arguably, Van Manen's argument could be extended to second language learners. The skills learnt from live interaction should not be sacrificed for solitary reading.

Method

Twenty-one Engineering students in a compulsory English class were asked whether they preferred listening to the teacher give a live reading to the class, or to an audio-book in solitary. They had completed a semester of study which involved weekly activities of both listening to three live readings of a text by the teacher as a group, and discussing it in pairs, and solitary online reading and listening to stories for homework. The views of these students concerning their comprehension of the texts in both modes of

delivery have been reported earlier (Stephens, 2017). The current study focuses on comparing the group aspect of listening to a live reading with the solitary aspect of listening to a recorded text. Both modes of delivery included an assessment component. The former required students to identify ten synonyms which had been substituted for various words in the live reading. The latter required students to respond to comprehension questions.

The questionnaires had been translated from English into Japanese, and students were asked to respond in either English or Japanese. All of the students responded in Japanese. The Japanese responses were translated by one of the authors into English.
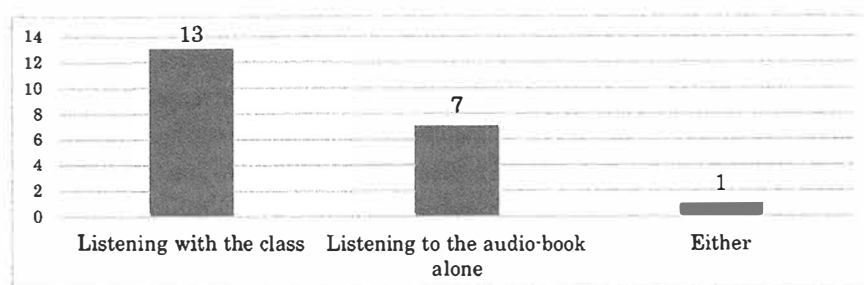
Results and Discussion

Figure 1: Engineering students' preferences for listening with the group and listening to the audio-book alone

Those who prefer listening with the class included the following reasons:
・相談できるから。
　　　I can discuss it. (x2)
・ライバルがいた方がいい。
　　　I prefer having rivals.
・勝負しているから。
　　　It's competitive.
・自分とは違う訳を聞くことで考え方の幅が広がる。
　　　My ideas are expanded when hearing an alternative translation.
・そんなに英語力が無いので質問できる人がいた方がいいから。
　　　I am not very good at English so I prefer having someone I can question.

・分からない意味をすぐに聞けるから。

    If there is something I didn't understand, I can ask straight away. (x2)

・分からなかった単語や内容を相談できるため。

    I can discuss phrases and content that I didn't understand.

・一人だと集中力が切れやすい。

    It's hard to concentrate on my own.

・自分一人だと集中しにくい。

    If I am by myself I lose concentration.

・より実践的。

    It's more practical.

・オーディオブックは家でも聴くことができるから。

    I can listen to an audio-book at home. [This respondent prefers listening together if in class.]

Those who prefer listening to the audio-book alone gave reasons including the following:

・自分一人の都合で調節できるから。

    I can adjust it at my own convenience.

・静かなときに聞けて集中できるからである。

    I can concentrate on listening to it when it is quiet.

・より集中できる。

    I can concentrate better.

・集中できるから。

    I can concentrate. (x2)

・雑音がない。好きなタイミングで止めたりできる。音量調節しやすい。

    There is no background noise. I can stop it when I want to. It's easy to adjust the volume.

・雑音がなく、自分が聞き取れなかった所を後で聞くことができるから。

    There is no background noise. I can listen to parts I couldn't understand later.

The student who indicated no preference stated:

・差異を感じない。

    I don't sense any difference.

Although most students preferred listening with the class, there was a sizeable minority who preferred listening alone. The reason for this may be attributed to individual differences. For some students, concentration was facilitated by listening in a group. For others, concentration was facilitated by listening to the audio-book alone. Accordingly, it is not a question of whether listening in a group or listening alone promotes concentration, but rather the conditions under which individual students are able to concentrate. Because of this critical factor of individual differences, it cannot be recommended that listening always and necessarily be carried out in a group context. Clearly, a judicious blend of both is recommended in order to accommodate individual differences.

Reasons diverged markedly for those who preferred listening in a group. Some preferred the support of having partners with whom they could discuss their listening comprehension, whereas others valued the competitive nature of vying with their peers. Again, individual differences account for the varying reasons for which some students prefer to work in a group. The co-operative and the competitive nature of group work are evaluated differently by different students. Whether this is due to personality factors such as extroversion and introversion merits further investigation.

Preferences for listening in a group may be due to the mediating influence of the teacher and peers on comprehension. Block (2003) and Swain et al. (2011) explain the notion of scaffolding, in which the competent other mentors the novice. Scaffolding is possible in a group, with the teacher or peers mentoring the students' comprehension of the spoken text. In the case of this study of the group listening to a spoken text, there were multiple opportunities for peer scaffolding. In between each live reading, the students were instructed to confer with each other in pairs. A total of three live readings afforded them three opportunities for scaffolding. After the three readings an opportunity for scaffolding by the teacher was provided; the students were invited to ask the teacher questions about the wording of the text.

Many of those who preferred listening online in solitude mentioned the improved concentration this afforded. This may be because it became possible to minimize background noise. In the classroom, external noise from traffic and construction sometimes filters inside. The elimination of

background noise is an unrealistic aim because it cannot necessarily be replicated in naturally occurring conversations. Nevertheless, it may facilitate the development of comprehension skills which can be later transferred to situations in which there is background noise. Another advantage of solitary listening online, which cannot necessarily be replicated easily in naturally occurring conversation, is being able to adjust the sound at one's own convenience. Technology permits instant adjustments in sound, which are only achieved in naturally occurring conversations by efforts at eliciting clarification.

Conclusion

There is still a place for communal listening to a reading of a text. Many students value the practice of listening in a group, because of its interactive nature, because of the competition it may instil, and because the nature of group work facilitates concentration for at least some. This is not to suggest that CALL be discontinued. Solitary online learning can serve a foundation for class discussion, as in the case of flipped learning. As Tokuhama-Espinosa (2014) recommends: "When we use a variety of methods to learn something, we are putting the same information in our brain in slightly different neural pathways" (p. 128). Both modes of delivery are recommended, and it is suggested that the traditional activity of the live reading aloud of stories to students, and classroom interaction, not be abandoned in favour of online listening.

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