

Student difficulties when reading-while-listening

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For English language learners, many of the features of spoken text are not evident from the written text alone. Sacks (2010) explained the relationship between the visual, auditory and other aspects of processing the written word:

Reading, of course, does not end with the recognition of visual word forms - it would be more accurate to say that it begins with this. Written language is meant to convey not only the sound of words but their meaning, and the visual word form area has intimate connections to the auditory and speech areas of the brain as well as to the intellectual and executive areas, and to the areas subserving memory and emotion. (p. 63)

Phonological processing is a prerequisite for L1 literacy development (Sousa, 2005; Wood et al., 2009) but this tends to be overlooked in L2 literacy development. In the past, graded readers for English learners did not always come with audio support. However, L2 learners also benefit as “phonological processing is a sine qua non of successful literacy development” (Goetry et al., 2009, p. 169). Accordingly, in order for extensive reading to be conducted more efficiently, phonological processing deserves attention. Stephens (2016) therefore recommended that beginner Japanese students of English abandon silent reading in favour of reading-while-listening (RWL).

One of the critical features of spoken text that is absent from written text is intonation. Rajan (2015) explained that English language intonation is extreme in its use of pitch contours. Normal English intonation is often considered exaggerated by learners of English (Reed & Michaud, 2015). This may be particularly true for Japanese learners of English who have a more restricted pitch range in their L1. Nevertheless, intonation carries grammatical meaning (Halliday, 1985), and therefore the teaching of grammar, vocabulary and intonation cannot be neatly or usefully separated.

Benefits of reading while listening

A solution to the weaknesses of silent reading for learners has been to supply simultaneous audio-recordings. Stephens (2019) speculated that by supplementing the features of spoken text that fluent readers superimpose on written text, such as intonation, fluent reading would be facilitated.

The authors decided to explore students' perspectives on the efficacy of RWL. The first survey asked 45 non-English majors in their second year of a required English course at a Japanese university to reflect on their experience of RWL and listening only. The following comments have been selected from the survey to represent why the learners prefer RWL to listening only. They clearly reveal two broad patterns, (a) matching the printed word to the sound and (b) understanding the content. There are also possible affective benefits.

Matching the Printed Words to the Sound

自分が聞き取ったことが正確か確認できるから

(Because you can check if what you heard is accurate.)

聞き逃したところも確認することができるから。

(You can also check what you missed.)

単語のつながりや速さ、難度の高い単語は文章を見ていないと聞き取るのが難しかったから。

(Word connections, speed, and difficult words were difficult to hear without looking at the text.)

単語の発音のつながりが分からないため、英文を見ながらであれば、何の子音が消えているかを理解できるから。

(Because I don't know the pronunciation of connected words, I can understand what consonants are disappearing by looking at the English sentence.)

確実に単語を聞き取れるから

(I can definitely hear the words.)

Understanding the Content

何を言っていたのかわからなくても、英文を見ることで単語を拾い理解できるから

(Even if you don't know what was said, you can pick up and understand the words by looking at the English sentences.)

すぐに確認できるから。

(You can check it right away.)

聞き取れなかった部分も文字を目で追うことで理解で

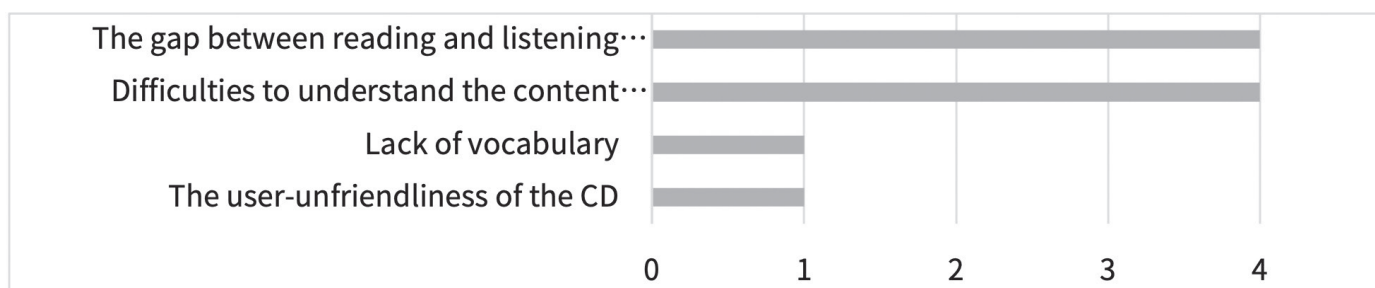


Figure 1: What difficulties did you have when reading while listening?

きるから。

(You can understand the parts that you couldn't hear by following the letters with your eyes.)

文を見ずにリスニングをするのは少し理解が追いつかないから。

(Listening without looking at the sentence is a little difficult to understand.)

聞き逃すことがないし聞くより読む方が理解できるから。

(I won't miss it and I can understand it better than listening.)

耳からだけでなく目からも情報を読み取れるから。

(Information can be read not only from the ears but also from the eyes.)

聞き取りづらいところも文を読めば理解できたから。

(I could understand the hard-to-hear parts by reading the sentences.)

Affective Benefits

文章を見ながら聞いていたほうが、リラックスして聴けるから。

(It's better to listen while looking at the text because you can relax and listen.)

Limitations of reading while listening

A separate survey was designed to elicit student difficulties with RWL. It revealed an unanticipated finding: the speed of the recorded text, and the speed at which the students are comfortable reading, is unmatched. One of the authors, Stephens, an L1 English speaker, had wrongly assumed that reading speeds would be faster than the speed of listening to recorded text. However, the authors learnt that for some learners the reverse may be true: the speed of the audio may exceed their reading speed.

Ten English majors in the second semester of their second year at a Japanese university, who were engaged in an extensive RWL program, participated in a written survey. They had been reading graded readers from

the university library, and had been required to read and listen to one book per week. Their responses to the survey in the fourth week of the semester about the difficulties of RWL can be seen in Figure 1.

Classroom Applications

More investigation is needed to help students successfully implement RWL. Isozaki (2021) coached her students to refine their implementation of RWL. Initially, she planned to help her students adjust their input to solve a mismatch between audio speeds and ease of reading by, for example, choosing to listen first and read later. However, Isozaki observed that what seemed to help the students even more was to adjust the audio speed according to their comprehension.

By choosing slower recordings students can obtain scaffolding in the process of developing listening skills. Some teaching resources, such as Xreading, already provide the option of slowing down the spoken text. Video platforms, such as YouTube and Netflix, also give the option of slowing down (or speeding up) playback. Students need to be encouraged to make use of audio resources that can be slowed down.

Another recommendation is for teachers to provide exaggerated prosody during a live delivery of a story, to enable students to harness prosody as they develop their listening skills. This could be attained by extending the spaces between words in a sentence, and extending the pauses between sentences. In addition, teachers need to explain to students how intonation contributes to meaning in the way it maps onto grammar.

Teachers should explain to students that listening to audio-recordings does not provide complete information about pronunciation. Students need to be made aware of the role of lip movement in pronunciation, and how observing lip movement can aid their listening comprehension. Teachers can deliver live readings to demonstrate lip movement. Classes provided via video conferencing provide opportunities to provide close-up images of lip movement to

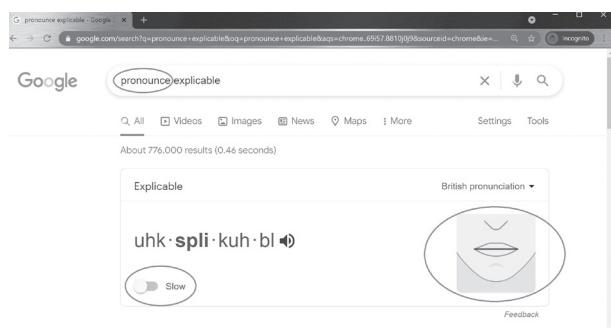


Figure 2: Example of Google's pronounce feature.

demonstrate pronunciation (Stephens, 2021). Google's pronounce feature (<https://google.com/search?q=pronounce+inexplicable>) is also useful for displaying both images of lip movement, and the pronunciation of individual words in British and American English. This feature offers two speeds, as can be seen on the bottom left of the screenshot in Figure 2.

Conclusions

RWL resources have recently increased in availability and it is recommended that they replace silent reading for language learners because of the importance of phonological processing and intonation in reading comprehension. However, students engaged in RWL have specified difficulties that they experience, such as the mismatch of the speed of the audio and their reading speed. It is recommended that teachers provide scaffolding as an intermediary step towards the goal of achieving listening comprehension. This could be achieved by providing both audio resources which can be slowed down, and live readings with exaggerated intonation and with slightly longer pauses between words and sentences than in fluent speech. More research into closing the gap between the speed of parsing spoken and written text for learners, such as in Isozaki's (2021) study, is warranted.

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