

ERJ

Extensive Reading in Japan

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Starting Extensive Listening

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While we are called the ER SIG, we also deal with Extensive Listening (EL). What better person to tell us about EL than Rob Waring? Rob has been actively promoting EL for a decade and is the moderator of the EL mailing list. He is one of the few people to have published research on EL. Hopefully some of the readers of this article will follow in his footsteps and do more EL research. Please note as well that this article is aimed more at students than teachers. We welcome articles for either audience.

What is Extensive Listening?

Extensive Listening (EL) involves fluently listening to a lot of comprehensible language. It is a way to improve your listening fluency. But what is listening fluency? When you learn a language, there are two things you need to do. First, you need to learn the grammar and the vocabulary and so on. Most people practice with grammar books and vocabulary books and by learning for tests by analyzing the words and grammar in detail - learning their rules and how they work. This method is similar to learning how a car engine or a radio works. You can take the engine to pieces little by little, examining it and you can find out how each part (the grammar and vocabulary) of the engine works by itself. While this is a good thing to do, it's not the only thing you need to do. Taking an engine to pieces doesn't teach you how to drive the car (use the language). To be a good language user you have to know how to use the language. And that means practice actually getting on the road and driving the car - actually listening, reading, writing and speaking English.

The second thing you need to learn is how the grammar and

vocabulary go together to make communicative messages and how they live and breathe as a living thing. The best way to do this is to read or listen to language, which you understand. If you understand almost all of the text you listen to, you can build your word recognition speed, you'll notice more uses of grammar points, more collocations and generally your brain will be working very effectively. The listening, provided it is done at the correct level, will also help improve automatic processing of language which allows your working memory to concentrate on comprehending what you are listening to.

So, building fluency means building your listening speed and being able to understand almost everything you are listening to at the level you are listening. A beginner level student would listen to something with very few unknown words and the simplest of grammar. An intermediate level listener would choose a listening text that had a wider range of vocabulary and grammar, but, importantly it is still quite easy and has few unknown words. So the important point here is that 'difficulty' is NOT a property of a text, but of the listener. A given text may be easy for one person, but the same text may not be easy for another. Therefore one's ability level decides whether a given listening text is easy or not.

Choosing the right EL level

Many people try EL but soon give up. The main reason they gave up is that they chose listening texts, which were too difficult. As they listened, there were words and

grammar they did not understand which stopped or slowed their comprehension, they became frustrated, then tired, then gave up. Some people even blame EL itself for not working, but in fact the reason it didn't work is that many people chose listening material at the wrong level. There's nothing wrong with EL, only inappropriately chosen listening materials!

It is *very* important that the listening be at the right level. This is the key to successful EL; of this there is no doubt. Remember, the aim of EL is to build listening fluency (speed of recognition of words and grammar) so if the listening text is too hard, you'll become frustrated that you cannot listen smoothly, and only by listening smoothly can you build automatic recognition of language, and only when you can recognize words and grammar quickly and smoothly can you process it quickly and thus enjoy it painlessly. So how do you choose the right listening material? There are several key things to decide. You should listen to something and ask yourself these questions...

- Can I understand about 90% or more of the content (the story or information)?



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- Can I understand over 95-98% of the vocabulary and grammar?
- Can I listen and understand without having to stop the CD or tape?
- Am I enjoying the content of the listening material?

If the answer to *all* these questions is *yes*, then you have found the right level for you. If the answer to *any* of them is *no* then it may be a bit difficult for you and you may get frustrated, tired and under these conditions you'll not enjoy the listening and soon stop. You may even get discouraged. If you don't enjoy the content of the listening material, you'll soon become bored, so choose something interesting. If you think something is enjoyable but it's too hard, you can try it because your natural interest will compensate for the lack of language. Similarly, if you know a lot about the topic but the language is too hard, then you may understand because of your background knowledge. But don't try something which is too hard. Put it to one side and come back to it later after your listening speed has increased.

So the best thing to do to find your own listening level is to find listening materials of different levels. Then, using the criteria for finding your own level above, listen to a little of each of the recordings and find something comfortable for you. Listen to that level for a while and when you feel your comprehension improves from the minimum 90% to 100% and you know all the vocabulary and grammar, then move up to the next level. When you move up to the next level, remember you will be working with more difficult language and grammar and your comprehension level may slow down, but don't let it go under the 90% benchmark or you won't be listening extensively.

Don't be tempted to listen above your level. EL is not like sports,

when you can push your body until it hurts so you can improve your strength. If you push your listening speed too much, you won't understand and then you can learn very little and it won't be enjoyable.

Choosing the right materials

There are lots of EL materials you can use. Many publishers have CDs or audio cassettes which have a recording of graded readers. Graded readers are books at various difficulty levels, usually from Level 1 (which has only very basic words and very simple grammar) to Level 2, which has a few extra words, and slightly higher grammar levels, and so on for Level 3, 4 and higher. These recordings are often of a very high quality and are read in interesting ways. They can really help your understanding.

However, be very careful about assuming that because you can read say a 500 headword graded reader smoothly, that you can also listen to it smoothly. For most Japanese people, this is not so. Most Japanese people's listening speed is much slower than their reading speed. A good piece of advice is to listen to something two levels lower (easier) than your smooth reading level. And it's a good idea to listen to the same text again a few times so your listening speed and automaticity will increase.

Be careful of using Native level (authentic) listening materials

Many people believe that if they listen to English radio over the Internet, watch movies in English, or watch English TV shows, that their listening will improve because they are listening to authentic English. They believe that, as the aim is to learn to listen like a native, that it will be beneficial. However, for the majority of Japanese learners this would be a big mistake because it confuses the 'what' with the 'how'.

The ultimate aim *is* to listen to native materials, but English speaking parents don't give their 4 year old child *Time* magazine to read. Nor do they start them with *Harry Potter*. They start their reading by simple picture books with easy words and grammar and over time they introduce more difficult things. This is the same for language learning, so you too must start with something you too can understand. Don't worry about listening to *very easy* texts, everyone has to start somewhere!

For the *vast* majority of Japanese learners reading or listening to authentic English texts is not beneficial. Remember, to benefit from EL, the listening should be easy, because if it's not easy, you don't build fluency and can get frustrated and tired. So, only very, very advanced learners of English (who have a very big vocabulary and a very deep sense of grammar) can really understand the foreign movies or TV show (or read or listen to *Harry Potter*) in English. For people who understand less than 90% of the movie, very little or no new English will be learnt, and thus watching the movie, linguistically, is just noise. Students need to understand at least 90% of the movie or tape so that their working memory can notice new words and phrases easily. If you understand less than 90%, then it's likely your brain is too busy trying to follow the movie to notice new language, so you probably won't learn much new language. Therefore it is VITAL you listen at the right level (90% understanding or higher) so you can benefit not only from enjoying the story, but also learn new language.

Some people also think that if they listen and read the subtitles, that they can improve their listening. This is also not so because the subtitles do not have all the words and are not always a direct translation. So in fact you'd only be understanding what the subtitle says, not the original spoken English.

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Also, don't be tempted to try children's DVDs in English either, because these are spoken in child's language and are thus unsuitable for adults. The language in these DVDs is not easy either - some of it is very complex even though it looks simple.

Listening-while-reading

This is a very good idea. One main benefit of listening-while-reading is that you can build your reading vocabulary, see how written

Listening Partner, or a make a Listening Circle. If you buy materials and share them with others, you can instantly have a much wider library of things to listen to. You can also encourage each other, discuss the interesting and boring things to listen to, and maybe make some friends at the same time.

Enjoy your listening

Learning to be a good listener

take a regular time

are pronounced, and sense the
ion as well as at the same
This can only help your
g ability. However, make sure
speed on the CD of audio
is at a level that you can
fluently (remember, the
above?) If the recording is at
speed, than you can listen, it's
ng to help.

each day to listen to English at your
level. This could be on the bus, on the
train, as you eat breakfast, or even as
you make dinner. Just try to make it a
regular habit and you'll soon find
your English listening improving
very fast. If you find it hard to make a
regular time by yourself, then make a
regular meeting time each week with
your Listening Partner or Listening
Circle. Forcing yourself to make a
time can help you focus. If the best
piece of advice is have fun and you'll
not have to worry about making a
commitment to your listening.

Happy Listening!

Resources

Here are a few online listening
resources you may wish to visit:

- ELLLO - English Language
Listening Lab Online <http://www.elllo.org>. There are over
1000 free online listening

activities for teachers and
students. Many activities
have quizzes and a transcript.

- Spotlight Radio: <http://www.spotlightradio.net> uses a specially modified form of English to make listening to the radio easier. You can listen and read at the same time.
- Voice of America - Special English: <http://www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm>

Difficult materials

If your EL listening materials
are on CD, you can burn them to a
CD and listen to them there (or
put them on a music player to
take the way to work or school).
One benefit of this is that if you have
a CD player, you can adjust the speed to
be easier to listen to! The speed
of audiobooks can be adjusted in the

Listening partners

Buying EL materials can be
expensive so it's a good idea to find a

www.voanews.com/specialenglish/index.cfm

These are broadcasts in

simple English (only 1500

different words) on hundreds

of topics. It started in 1959

and is still going strong.

Connected with English:

<http://www.learner.org/resources/series71.html>

A video instructional series in

English as a second language

for college and high school

classrooms and adult

learners; 50 fifteen-minute

video programs and 1

coordinated books.

BBC World Service - Learning

English: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/multimedia/>

This site has hundreds of

listening activities and text

from the BBC's extensive

archives.

words
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