Listening skills acquisition through the incorporation of online resources into the EFL environment

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The Internet is an indispensible tool in global communications. Its sheer power has already been demonstrated, particularly during recent democratic uprisings in countries with repressive regimes. Access to real-time information enables us to face circumstances in the world as they are. In many ways, therefore, there is no argument for not applying it to language acquisition, viewing language as a "raw material". Students and language learners often lament the fact that you never really get to learn a language without being in the country where it is spoken. In today's world, shaped in many ways by the ubiquity of the Internet, I believe we have the ability to develop our language skills, listening skills in particular, to a certain degree without having to stay in the country where the target language is spoken. Despite the wealth of resources available online and offered free of charge, learners, as Doe and other instructors have pointed out, may require some systematic instruction on their use. (30) In addition, it may be necessary to combine several types of resources to heighten their effectiveness. For example, some language websites enable users to listen to a brief conversation followed by a comprehension question test and the provision of a script, while other websites actually offer access to video

recordings of university lectures, which - naturally - are not meant for language students, but for native speakers. Of course, there are appropriate resources for each level of language student. Some might say it is difficult for new language students to navigate all the resources available online. However, as demonstrated by Yamauchi, lower level language students are able to enjoy the learning process and learn effectively through the integration of online resources.[1] Moreover, activities involving the use of online resources tend to create a task-based language learning environment, which could stimulate student motivation (Hamilton, 2010; Dias and Strong, 2009). In this essay, I will introduce several types of English learning websites, including a few that I use as part of my university-level English classes.

A. Websites with scripts

1) Sites intended for students of English

The useful and beneficial aspects of this type of resource include the language student's ability to check the answers and scripts of the conversations immediately after completing the listening comprehension questions. They can listen to the target conversation as many times as they want and, if necessary, read along. Moreover, the presentation of words to be memorized in the conversations could help the language students expand their vocabulary. The tempo of the conversation is often slower than normal, as it is geared to students of the language. Accordingly, this type of online resource may be well suited to students with

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[1] Yamauchi discusses the impact of the Internet based on research she conducted, involving 19 female students with a lower level command of English. Their TOEIC scores ranged from 205 to 570, with the majority (13/19) scoring under 350.

lower level listening skills.

2) Speeches, lectures and interviews

Nowadays, YouTube and other websites make it possible to view speeches made by all manner of key figures and celebrities, which are sometimes accompanied by English subtitles or a translation in Japanese. The most beneficial aspect of this type of online resource is that language students can listen to English used in a real life context. As they are not produced for language students, the tempo of speech and type of language used is more natural. Students can review and study unfamiliar vocabulary by reading the scripts. A less beneficial aspect is that, as there are usually no related exercises developed for these sites, the language students can take a passive approach or sometimes read the scripts or translation first without making an effort to understand the content first through listening. Consequently, instructors who opt to use this type of resource would be wise to develop their own listening comprehension exercises and find a way to make the students view the site without reading the scripts or translation first. This type of site may be suited to intermediate language students.

B. Websites without scripts

1) Speeches, lectures, interviews, podcasts, etc.

The beneficial aspects of these types of websites are comparable to those with scripts: students of English can listen to natural speech in a real-life context. In addition, they can choose a resource that fits their interests. Language students can choose from a wide range of online resources, including everything from lectures by renowned professors to YouTube clips addressing any topic. As these websites rarely provide scripts, it may be more

suited to advanced students, who experience the lectures or YouTube clips not only as part of a learning process, but also as entertainment. In addition, once the files are loaded to an iPod or other portable media player, you can listen to them on your way to school, work, etc. This is precisely the same as what is done with music files. There is a wealth of podcasts produced by TV shows, magazines, educational institutions, etc. Once the language students set up their system and podcast account, new podcasts are made available automatically on a daily, weekly or monthly basis, depending on the podcast schedule. Both paid and free podcasting sites are highly useful. For example, as I am interested in literature and history, I have registered with the free BBC World Book Club and BBC History Magazine services, as well as some websites offering podcasts on current events. I enjoy the topics addressed by and discussions among the BBC World Book Club and BBC History Magazine listeners from around the world. These are updated monthly. Meanwhile, some websites offer registered users access to podcasts of news broadcasts presented in American, British, and Australian English, which are usually updated every other day. It should again be noted that these sites require an advanced level of English ability. However, the users are able to choose the program that best fits their interests. Although there are generally no scripts available, they do often include useful summaries or outlines. These less formal learning environments enable language students to derive more enjoyment from developing their skills in English further. Moreover, the podcasts involving the use of a wide range of English variants, including British, American, Australian, Singaporean, etc., may eventually raise their awareness about World Englishes.[2]

 Next, I would like to introduce the websites I actually use as

part of my university-level English courses.

1. Randall's ESL Cyber Listening (www.esl-lab.com/)

Website visitors first listen to a brief conversation and then complete comprehension questions, which is a good exercise for English proficiency certification exams (e.g. TOEIC). The beneficial aspect of this site is that students can select conversation topics of interest to them at one of three levels: beginner, intermediate and advanced. While listening to the conversation, the students read the comprehension questions and select and click the most appropriate answer from the three or four statements or a vocabulary term. They can listen to the conversation as many times as they want and read the script after completing the exercise. Usage examples help the students learn vocabulary terms. I have used this site for both advanced students and beginners. For both target groups, I demonstrate how to use this resource during the first classroom session and then have the students work independently. For the advanced class, I usually ask the students to listen to seven or ten topics from the intermediate and advanced level as homework and then give them a listening comprehension and vocabulary test later on. As for the beginners, I ask them to pick a topic from the beginner level series and have them listen to the conversation three to five times and then answer listening comprehension questions. I then assign three or four conversations from the beginner level series and give them a listening comprehension and vocabulary test. I often get positive

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[2] World Englishes apply to the appearance of localised variants of English, varieties that have developed in nations colonized by UK or USA and also in the countries, which are affected by Western and where English is becoming an important language in business, science, technology and education. (Jenkins 2006)

feedback about this site from both groups of students. Their ability to check the answers and scripts right away seems to reassure them and leads to improved comprehension. In addition, students are able to use this site anywhere they want as long as they have Internet access. Many indicate their intention to continue using the site even after completing the required English classes. Although this site is useful as a resource for supplementary material or assignments, it will take more than simply introducing the site to incorporate it as part of the class curriculum. It needs to be used systematically and offer students quick responses. This is why the follow-up listening comprehension tests are necessary to encourage students to listen to the website.

２．Academy of Achievement

(http://www.achievement.org/autodoc/pagegen/galleryachieve.html)

This site enables visitors to listen to interviews of the renowned and famous from a broad range of fields, including music, art, business, politics, science, sports, etc. I am certain users will know or have heard of at least a few of the names presented. The interviewees talk about their lives in detail as they respond to the interviewers questions. A nice aspect of this site is that users can watch the video, enabling them to see facial expressions while listening to the interview. In addition, a script is provided so users can read along if necessary. The length of the interviews is admittedly fairly long, so it would be best to break it up into two or three parts. It would also be better to view the interviews several times without the script. Despite the availability of the script, the speed of speech in the interview is rather fast, so this site is probably best suited to intermediate and advanced students. The most enjoyable aspect of this site is how the

interviewees passionately discuss the details of their life story, the trials and tribulations they have faced, their belief system, etc., which is very engaging for listeners (i.e. us). In many ways, it is more like watching personal biographies. Listeners forget about the original purpose for using the site, namely to improve listening skills.

As stated above, the beneficial aspects of this site include the ability to see the interviewees' facial expressions while watching the interview and to read the script at the same time. However, the length of the interviews is such that it would be wise to divide the interviews into two or three sections or - if concentration is an issue - to focus on one interview question. Moreover, it would be better not to read the script, at least when listening to the interview for the first time, and to refer to it only to check on vocabulary terms or phrases that are unfamiliar or that you did not catch at first. Above all, the site proves highly engaging and stimulating due to the "documentary feel" of the way in which the interviewees discuss their life experiences, enabling the visitors to enjoy the story not only from a personal development perspective, but also - in our case - as a means of improving listening skills.

3. Steve Jobs

This is a recording of the Stanford University commencement address given by well known founder of Apple, Steve Jobs, in 2005. Celebrities are often invited to give the commencement address at U.S. universities, and Job's speech has proven immensely popular. It can be viewed on YouTube or on Stanford University's website. There are several versions available of this approximately 15-minute speech, with or without subtitles. Some even include a Japanese translation. I use this speech along with

a listening comprehension exercise I developed. I have advanced students view the speech twice without subtitles, involving a total time of 30 minutes, during which I have them answer the comprehension questions. We then run through the answers together, as we view the speech again, but this time with English subtitles. For lower level students, I usually divide the speech into three five-minute parts and then follow the same format as above, though I do sometimes use a version of the speech with Japanese subtitles.

I recommend his speech due to its clear organizational structure and high degree of accessibility (i.e. it is easy to follow). It can perhaps serve as a model for the types of presentations students will likely give for other classes. He first clearly states that he will address three aspects of his life, and then continues on to discuss them one by one in detail. This clear organizational structure could also be applied to improving basic writing skills in English (e.g. style).

Above all, Job's life story seems to fascinate students: college dropout, founder of Apple, his dismissal from Apple, his battle with cancer, etc. Much like the Academy of Achievement site, it evokes more a feeling of learning about a successful person's philosophy on life, rather than a lesson in English listening skills.

4．Tamra Davis Cooking Show

(http://www.tamradaviscookingshow.com/)

This cooking site is produced by Tamra Davis, an American woman who used to work in the film industry, lives in New York with her husband and two children, works as a part time volunteer and is active in the food and catering industry, all in addition to producing this website. We can view a day in the culinary life of

the Davis family, accompanied by narration by Tamra and appropriate background music. The 10-minute videos are engaging and offer a very personal glimpse into their lives. Her children sometimes explain the recipe, which is very sweet. The nice thing about this site is that we can listen to daily conversations in various real-life contexts, including grocery shopping, parenting situations, parties at home and gatherings of friends. In addition, her extremely broad repertoire, which ranges from traditional American dishes to Mexican or Middle Eastern dishes, is presented in a well-organized fashion. You nearly feel inspired to cook along. Although no scripts are available, the recipes are presented on screen, and the homepage offers detailed explanations, offering language students an avenue for comprehension follow-up. The conversations are not complicated, so we can enjoy the videos without frustration.

5. Professor Michael Sandel Homepage
   (http://www.justiceharvard.org/)

This is the homepage of renowned Harvard professor, Michael Sandel, whose lectures have been broadcast on NHK. The most attractive aspect of this site is that this series of recorded lectures is presented in a way that helps you feel like you are in the audience. We experience his lecture as if we were one of his students. In addition to listening to the lectures, we also get to see how students share their opinions while referring to the professors' questions, how they debate certain issues and how Professor Sandel guides the audience, starting with general statements and eventually leading to riveting philosophical arguments. There are no scripts, but the website does offer a summary, overview of key terms and definitions for each lecture,

which proves highly useful in helping us to follow the lectures. In addition, a book based on his lectures has been published in both English and Japanese. Reading the book while using this site will enable us to gain a basic knowledge of political philosophy as well.

BBC World Book Club

This British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) website presents discussions with authors from all over the world of an English-language book. We can enjoy the real-life mood of the discussion between the author and readers, which is held in The Barbican in London. An attractive aspect of this site is that, provided you have read the book selected, you can participate in the discussion by email or even by phone regardless of where you are in the world. In addition, the author invited and the discussion participants are often non-native speakers of English, which in some ways aptly demonstrates how English is an effective tool for communication, which is able to transcend differences in English variants. While I do not actually use this site in my courses, I do introduce it to advanced students majoring in language and literature. Regardless, it would be nice to have a similar site for every discipline, enabling people from all over the world to come together and take part in an online discussion. People are coming together in celebration of a common interest, not in response to issues of nationality or race, which could promote awareness of and encourage our motivation to learn English as an effective means of international communication.

This essay has presented various websites for students of English, which could also prove useful as part of university

lectures. Despite the potentially passive nature of "listening", the provision and introduction of teaching materials to develop listening skills drawn from real-life contexts could promote and encourage the students' interest and positive attitude toward learning English. While a certain degree of instruction and/or discipline must be imposed in their use, I feel we can improve listening skills to a certain extent even while in non-English speaking countries by making effective use of the websites such as those presented in this paper.

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