

WHAT CAN L2 TEACHERS DO TO ASSIST L2 LEARNERS TO DEVELOP LISTENING FLUENCY?

By Anna C-S. Chang, Hsing Wu University, Taipei

In my experience at many Asian conferences, some people in the audience laugh particularly loudly when they hear a native speaker of English saying something that might be funny. Strangely, they don't laugh so loudly if a non-native speaker of English says the same thing. There may be multiple reasons but this one is for sure. They want to let other people know that they can understand what the native speaker is saying, and they are proud of themselves for being able to listen fluently.

Listening, unlike speaking, is usually an individual process. That is the reason why teachers give students a speaking or writing comprehension check after listening to a passage. Otherwise it is difficult to know to what extent their students comprehend. This comprehension check leads to a misconception that teaching listening equates to testing listening. In interactive listening contexts, such the one mentioned above, laughing is a way for people to demonstrate that they are fluent listeners. Having good listening skills is the first step to using a language. As an L2 teacher for more than 20 years, I have often heard students say, "I like to learn English through speaking with English speakers not just leaning something from a book." Students normally think speaking the language is superior to understanding it, without knowing that understanding must precede speaking. Having good input skills in both reading and listening has been found to be more effective to acquire a target language than having only one input skill. Given the importance of listening skills, how can we help our students to develop listening fluency?

What is listening fluency?

Fluency across all skills involves two fundamental components: speed and ease. Nation and Newton (2009) described some characteristics of fluency in comprehending oral utterances: doing meaning-focused activities without holding up the flow, with little attention and effort while processing the language; and being able to use prior knowledge to restructure what they know to reach a reasonable degree of performance. Simply put, listening fluency refers to listeners' ability to process aural input delivered at a normal speed with ease without paying too much attention to decoding word meaning and to reconstruct what is heard with what is already known.

Developing listening fluency requires a great deal of input over a long period of time. Therefore, relying on formal instruction is not sufficient; L2 learners must spend much

more time listening outside the class. There are many ways that teachers can assist their L2 students to develop fluency more efficiently, such as repeated listening. In this article, however, we will focus on extensive listening and provide some techniques for implementing it.

Extensive Listening

Extensive listening involves listening to a large quantity of aural input. This can be live or through all sorts of media, such as radio, television, internet, and audio books. One of the benefits of extensive listening in learning an L2 is developing aural vocabulary because listening to a large quantity of easy texts allows learners to repeatedly hear the same patterns of phonemes, words, and collocations, and learners then become more rapid and more accurate at decoding the words they hear. Extensive listening can also increase world knowledge. As in reading, efficient word recognition seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for good comprehension. Another essential component for developing good listening skills is background or topical knowledge. As learners listen to a large quantity of varying texts, their world knowledge improves. With increased aural vocabulary and background knowledge, it is easier for a learner to comprehend a language.

L2 teachers may wonder how to implement extensive listening in their courses. Because extensive listening is a very broad term, listeners can listen to anything in their independent study time and daily life. However, for beginners or lower level learners, some assistance in the beginning stage is essential otherwise they may quit before they see the effect. Narrow listening and narrow viewing are effective ways of increasing listening input and developing listening skills.

Techniques for implementing extensive listening

Narrow listening

In this article, a subset of extensive listening—narrow listening, will be brought in; the concept of narrow listening was first introduced by Krashen (1996). Narrow listening simply means that learners focus on one topic (e.g., weather or sports, or one author) and systematically do a great deal of listening in the area they choose rather than listening randomly. This approach is suitable for learners across all proficiencies and is often interesting for L2 learners because they choose their own topic. Nowadays, there are many sources that L2 learners can use, for example:

1. Audio graded readers: Many original classics have been adapted and graded to help L2 learners expose themselves to literature in the target language as early as possible. Most graded readers, in particular those at the lower levels, have audio versions. They are often highly interesting and listeners can get hooked easily. Teachers can help students to select their own materials by the same authors, the

same theme, or the same title. For example, Tim Vicary adapted or wrote several human-interest stories: *The Elephant Man*, *Grace Darling*, and *The Mysterious Death of Charles Bravo*. Cambridge publishes a series of readers related to crime. Some classic fiction, such as *The Secret Garden* and *A Christmas Carol*, is published by different publishers at different levels. Some of the empirical evidence of using audio graded readers to improve listening fluency can be seen in the studies by Chang (2011; with Millett, 2014, 2016).

2. TV programs: Recent research on learning vocabulary from viewing related TV episodes found that related television programs contain fewer word families than unrelated ones (Rogers & Webb, 2011). This implies that narrow viewing may reduce learners' vocabulary load over time. In addition, characters generally don't change from episode to episode; after a few viewings, learners are familiar with the background and the characters so it will be easier for them to keep on viewing. Television programs are a great resource for learning spoken language usage, which does not commonly appear in formal textbooks. L2 teachers may recommend programs for students to watch, and then ask them to complete a listening journal, which may include the scenarios they watch and the language they hear. In class, the teacher may survey what programs their students watch and allow time for those students who watch the same TV program to discuss the program and share their feelings and the language they have picked up.

Simultaneous reading and listening

Due to the spontaneous and fleeting nature of spoken language, it is normally more difficult for L2 learners to control speech. Using written language to assist spoken language for comprehension has been found to facilitate comprehension (Chang, 2009, 2011; Chang & Millett, 2014, 2016). Doing simultaneous reading and listening may help L2 learners to confirm what is heard, to link the spoken with the written forms, and to understand how speakers segment the texts. Reading and listening skills can supplement each other, and it is particularly helpful for lower-level learners, who have little confidence of what is heard. This type of input is possible with audio graded readers for lower-level listeners and [TED talks](#) where written transcripts of the talks are supplied.

Going beyond listening only: Extended listening-focused activities

In addition to helping L2 students to select related rather than random texts to do listening practice with or without written text support, another step may be added in to improve the effectiveness, which is doing extended listening-focused activities. Recent research shows that students who did post-listening activities after listening and reading graded readers improved their TOEIC listening scores much more than those who did not (Chang & Millett, 2016). The extended listening-focus activities are based on graded readers. While listening to recordings of popular graded readers, students answer questions which focus their attention on the text. The technique is outlined in Millett (2014) and an example is included in the Appendix of this article. A library of these materials is available for use at <http://www.victoria.ac.nz/lals/about/staff/sonia-millett> . For students who want to improve their listening quickly, doing extended listening-focused activities does work well;

however, it is time-consuming to develop these activities unless a few teachers collaborate doing it.

Regular extended listening-focused activities and simultaneous reading and listening are effective steps on the path to listening fluency. Do them every day if you can. L2 teachers need to remember that doing extended listening-focused activities or simultaneous reading and listening are the means or process leading to fluency. It is hoped that our students can eventually listen without any of these supports. Fluency depends very much on constant practice. All activities are best to be done at least a few times a week if not daily.

References

- Chang, C-S. (2009). Gains to L2 listeners from reading while listening versus listening only in comprehending short stories. *System*, 37(4): 652-663
- Chang, C-S. (2011). The effect of reading while listening to audiobooks: listening fluency and vocabulary gain. *Asian Journal of English Language Teaching*, 19, 43-64.
- Chang, C-S. & Millett, S. (2016). Developing L2 listening fluency through extended listening-focused activities in an extensive listening program. *RELC Journal*, 47(3), 349-362. DOI: 10.1177/0033688216631175
- Chang, C-S. & Millett, S. (2014). The effect of extensive listening on developing L2 listening fluency: Some hard evidence. *ELT Journal*, 68(1): 31-40.
- Krashen, S. D. (1996). The case for narrow listening. *System*, 24(1), 97-100
- Millett, S. (2014) Quickclists: using what they already know *Modern English Teacher* 23(4), 64-65.
- Nation, I. S. P. & Newton, J. (2009). *Teaching ESL/EFL Listening and Speaking*. New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis.
- Rodgers, M. P. H. & Webb, S. (2011). Narrow viewing: The Vocabulary in related television programs. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(4), 689-717.
- Samuels, S. J. (2006). Reading fluency: Its past, present, and future. In T. Rasinsky, C. Blachowicz, & K. Lems (Eds.), *Fluency instruction: Research-based best practices* (pp. 7-20). New York: Guilford Press.

Appendix

The Phantom of the Opera/CD Pack by Jennifer Bassett (Series Editor),

Oxford Bookworms, Stage 1... (2008)

Introduction The Opera House in Paris

1. Listen for numbers and fill in the table.

Building started	
Building completed	
Cost	
Number of floors above ground	
Number of floors below ground	
Number of doors	

2. What does the Opera House have?
3. Is this a true story?
4. When did the story begin?

The Phantom of the Opera

Chapter One

The dancers

1. "Quick! Quick! Close the door! It's _____!"
2. What colour was Annie's face?
3. What did she see?
4. All the girls were afraid. True False
5. Did the tall girl look into the passage?
6. Joseph said he was _____ and wore a _____ evening coat.
7. Did he have a nose?
8. What did he have instead of eyes?
9. According to Meg Giry, what didn't he like?
10. Who told her this?
11. "... and one day Joseph Buquet is going to be _____, very _____."
12. What box did the ghost go to?
13. What did he sometimes leave for Meg's mother?

14. Did the girls believe Meg?
15. Did anyone buy tickets for the ghost's box?
16. Did her mother see the ghost?
17. Did she hear him?
18. Could the girls stop talking about the Opera ghost?
19. Did they talk loudly or quietly?
20. Who ran into the dressing room?
21. What colour was her face?

Author Bio



Anna C-S Chang teaches English at Hsing Wu University, New Taipei, Taiwan. She enjoys the challenges of teaching low-level students and likes seeing her students' smiling faces when they experience learning success. E-mail: annachang@livemail.tw