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An attempt at the use of smartphones and a You Tube video clip: An exploration of an EFL listening lesson in a university in Japan

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Abstract

This paper discusses a pilot study of an attempt to use an authentic material in an EFL listening lesson. A You Tube video clip and smartphones were used for the lesson. The subjects in the pilot lesson were freshmen in a non-language-related faculty in a university in Japan. Twenty two students were involved in this pilot study which was administered in the fall semester in 2018. The main aim of the pilot study was to serve as a pre-test and to observe whether the use of smartphones and the You Tube video clip was appropriate for the lesson in terms of drawing low-achieving and/or reluctant students' attention towards the lesson, and checking the level of English of the video. The aim of the pilot study also included accumulating qualitative data as a foundation for creating questionnaires for improving/evaluating similar lessons/materials in the future.

Keywords: Authentic Listening Materials, Japan, University, Low-achieving EFL Students, You Tube

You Tube を使ったリスニング授業の試みについて

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Introduction

At present smartphones are becoming a common tool among many people around the world and university students in Japan are not an exception. Such phones can be used to communicate, search for some information, watch video clips, make schedules, take notes, play games and so on. When going into a classroom for my lesson I have often witnessed that most students in the room were staring at their smartphones until starting the lesson. Some students try to put their phones on their desks even if it is prohibited during the lesson.

I started to consider that this situation could be utilised to enhance students' motivation or at least to draw their attention towards English itself during their lessons. There are many students who are reluctant to study English, especially in non-language-related faculties in Japanese universities (see e.g., Falout and Maruyama, 2004; Tatsumoto, 2011; Falout, 2012 for more details). My EFL classes also include many of such students.

Studies have shown positive effects of using authentic listening materials on EFL learners' motivation and achievements (Peacock, 1997; Kuo, 2009; Ghaderpanahi, 2012). However, in the field of second/foreign language (L2) learning only a limited number of studies have focused on the students of pre-intermediate or lower levels of English. In addition, hardly any research has examined the effect of authentic listening materials in the context of EFL classrooms in Japan. In other words, it has not yet been studied in a comprehensive way and there is a need for it to be investigated.

This paper discusses a pilot study of an attempt at using an authentic listening material in the context of an EFL classroom in Japan. The study was conducted by the author and smartphones were used by the participants to view and listen to a You Tube video clip. The participants in the experimental pilot lesson were freshmen of a non-language-related faculty in a university in Japan, and they were considered to be low-achievers (see 1.2 for more details).

The main aim of the present pilot study was to pre-test and to observe if the use of smartphones and a You Tube video clip was appropriate for the lesson in terms of drawing the students' attention towards the listening assignment in the lesson, and checking the level of English of the video. The aim of the study also included accumulating qualitative data as a foundation in order to create questionnaires for improving/evaluating listening lessons in similar contexts in the future.

In the first section, the methodology of the present pilot study is discussed. The second section includes the findings and discussion related to the main aim of this study. The final section considers possible contribution of this pilot study.

1. Methodology

In this section, the methodology of the present pilot study is discussed. The following subsections include descriptions of a qualitative research approach and the use of a case study, the participants and settings, the teaching method, and qualitative data collection and analytical techniques.

1.1 A qualitative research approach and the use of a case study

The design and implementation of the pilot study were qualitative and exploratory in nature since the main aim involves a 'brainstorming' process. In addition, the study entailed one single lesson involving an EFL class. Therefore, it is a single case study and serves as an exploratory pilot study.

It should be noted here that although the main aim was set research questions were not used in the present study in order to maintain a certain level of flexibility in the investigation (see e.g., Silverman, 2000 for more details of qualitative research).

1.2 The participants and settings

For the preparation of the present pilot study, I used the purposive sampling procedure which usually utilised in a qualitative research. A purposive sampling ensures that selected participants are representatives of a specific population rather than at random (Silverman, 2000; Denscombe, 2003). In the sampling, "researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population" (Berg, 2001: 32).

The researcher/author who conducted the pilot study had been the participants' teacher of EFL for more than one semester before the study was administered. Therefore, the researcher had some knowledge about the participants' attitudes towards studying English and their levels of English; many students reluctant to study English were included among the participants and they were considered to be low-achieving and/or low-level learners of EFL (see below in this section for more details). The participants belonged to a non-language-faculty in a university in Japan. Thus, they were suitable for the pilot study as the representatives of the target population which was mentioned in the introduction above.

It should be noted here that research ethics were considered in this pilot study, in particular, confidentiality, to protect the privacy of the participants (e.g., keeping their names confidential); and gaining informed consent through giving information regarding the way in which their data/information would be used.

The participants were 22 students in a non-language-related faculty in a university in Japan: three female and 19 male students were included and their ages were from 18 to 19 years old. They were freshmen at the time the pilot study was conducted. The study involved one 90-minute lesson which was administered in late November during the fall semester in 2018.

The capacity of the classroom used for the lesson was relatively small: around 30 people could be seated. The participants sat face to face in groups which consisted of three or four people. The classroom was equipped with a projector and a screen which could be connected to a laptop computer, and there were also a blackboard, desks and chairs for the students and the teacher (the desks and chairs were movable).

Regarding the participants' levels of English, the author of the present study has taught EFL to the students through both spring and fall semesters in 2018. According to her estimation, their levels of English were low and/or basic level as a class. This estimation was based on the students' answers on listening, writing and reading exercises in her English lessons. The textbook used for the both semesters was:

K. Murata and M. Otani (2012). *New English composition workbook—For functional writing skills*. Tokyo: Macmillan Languagehouse.

The textbook above is for basic-level students although it does not directly say so. It focuses on basic writing skills including basic listening exercises. It also involves many short passages which are mainly for grammar exercises; the teacher often used these passages as reading exercises even in cases where the passages were for other purposes.

As for the participants' writing and grammar skills, their levels of English had improved compared with those in the spring semester when most of them could barely write very basic sentences: in the fall semester they could write simple sentences properly (or at least at 'make-sense' levels). Concerning their listening skills, most of the participants improved to the point they could answer almost all of the listening questions in the textbook correctly by late in the spring semester. Their reading skills were also considered to be basic-level because they usually took 15 to 30 minutes to read the short passages (approximately 80 to 150 words) using dictionaries in a small group (three to five students) and still sometimes misunderstood meanings of some sentences. The passages involve elementary or basic words only.

1.3 The teaching method

A small-group-based learning method, which is considered to be a rough form of cooperative learning (hereafter; CL)¹, was used for the pilot study. The participants were divided into six groups which consisted of three to five people at the beginning of the spring semester in 2018. They have worked together in the same group since then; at the beginning of the fall semester in 2018 the teacher asked them if they wanted to reconstruct the groups but all of them preferred to stay in the same group. The number of students in the whole class was 25 and three of them were absent at the

¹ See e.g., Slavin, 1995; Olsen and Kagan, 1992 for more details of CL.

time of the pilot lesson. The groups consisted of three or four people during the lesson.

There were several rules for the group work in the lesson: 1) all students in the group are responsible to share their answers and ideas with their group members; 2) all of the students' answers presented in the lesson are regarded as answers of each group, not as those of individuals, and are counted as group-points which affect final grades of individual students; 3) the teacher monitors whether individual members of each group contribute to their own groups; 4) every answer from the students contributes positively to individuals' final grades as 'effort points' even if the answer is not correct because the level of the listening exercises in the lesson is much higher compared with that in the textbook; 5) the participants can listen to and watch the You Tube video clip as many times as they can within a given period of time designated by the teacher; 6) they do not have to answer all the questions on the content and can focus on trying to answer the questions they feel comfortable with (10 questions were assigned by the teacher: see Appendix).

The order of the lesson was as follows: 1) the teacher informed the students of the rules above and provided necessary descriptions of the listening content to the participants. The descriptions included basic information about making espressos, some background of the presenter in the You Tube video clip and the length of the video (about six minutes); 2) the teacher projected the questions to be answered on the screen including how to search for the video clip on You Tube site; 3) the teacher showed the whole six-minute video on the screen in order to demonstrate how to search for it and to indicate which video was the correct one; 4) the students worked on the assignment (about 40 minutes); 5) the students presented their answers to the whole class; 6) the teacher gave the correct answers to the students.

Concerning the You Tube video clip, the content is an educational six-minute video (Wolff College of Coffee, 2018) about how to make espresso-related coffee drinks. The target audience is people who are interested in coffee-making and professionals in the coffee industry in the world; the presenter in the video, who is an Australian professional barista (male), speaks English at a natural speed. However, important points were also shown in the form of letters on the screen along with visual information from the video. Therefore the students could have many clues to guess what the presenter said.

As for the teaching method of the usual lessons in the fall semester, the same style of CL as in the pilot lesson above was also used in those lessons using the textbook mentioned in the last subsection. However, there were several differences between those usual lessons and the pilot lesson. In the rules of the group work, there were always 'effort points' when a student-group showed a certain excellence compared with their own 'standard' answers about which the teacher was knowledgeable. In listening exercises, the number of times the students could listen to English for each exercise was two or three times and the length of English for one time was usually short (about one minute or shorter). The students usually had to answer all of the questions in each exercises in the textbook.

Regarding the order of the usual lessons, exercises were conducted as follows: 1) each group worked on the exercise assigned by the teacher; 2) after a given period of time, each group had to present their answers as a group; 3) the teacher showed the correct answers and evaluated each group's answers, acknowledging each group's effort points.

1.4 Qualitative data collection and analytical techniques

Multiple data collection procedures were used in the present pilot study. Although it is only a pilot study, the study is a qualitative investigation and multiple sources of data are important to confirm findings (Creswell, 1994; Bogdan and Biklen, 1998).

Class observation, casual interviews and a reflective journal were utilised in the pilot study. The main purpose of class observation was to collect information about the participants' attitudes concerning their attention/motivation in settings which involved watching/listening a You Tube video clip in the classroom using smartphones and working on the authentic listening material. The researcher took notes about students' behaviours, words and any incidents related to their attention/motivation during and right after the lesson.

Casual interviews were conducted in the form of casual talking with the participants during and after the lesson; the interviewer was a teacher of the participants and also the researcher of this study. The main aim of the interviews was to collect additional information; the interviewer talked to as many participants as possible in order to understand their behaviour, words and events more in-depth than by only observing the students. She took notes during and right after each interviews.

Regarding the reflective journal, the main aim was to improve the field notes and to control the observer's effect because observation is a subjective process. In other words, through writing the personal accounts the researcher tried to be as objective as possible and to comprehend the students' attitudes more closely and/or analytically. According to Elliott (1991: 77), observers' accounts should include "observations, feelings, reactions, interpretations, reflections, hunches, hypotheses, and explanations" and they are a useful tool for qualitative research.

The model of 'coding and categories' developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) was used to analyse all of the written data from the field notes of observation, the casual interviews and the reflective journal. It should be noted here that the notes from observation and interviews also included reflective journal/accounts because writing the journal/accounts was also part of the analysis of the qualitative data.

The same kinds of qualitative data were also collected from the usual lessons where the textbook (see 1.2) was used in order to compare with the data from the pilot lesson. Both sets of data were analysed in the same way as stated above. Word and Excel were used as software for the analysis.

2. Findings and discussion

In this section, I would like to discuss the findings from this pilot study. Before proceeding, we should recall the main aim of the study: to pre-test and observe whether the use of smartphones and the You Tube video clip were appropriate for the lesson in terms of drawing the low-achieving and/or reluctant students' attention towards the assignment in the lesson, and checking the level of English of the video. The findings are related to two key issues pertaining to the main aim: 1) changes in the participants' attention towards English or the assignment in the lesson; 2) the appropriateness of the level of English of the video clip for the participants. In addition, these two factors were examined by comparisons of the participants' attitudes towards assignments in the pilot study and those in other usual lessons from the textbook which was used for the participants in the fall semester of 2018. The findings are based on the qualitative data described in the last section. The following is the summary of the key findings.

Regarding the participants' attention towards the assignment in the pilot lesson, all of the participants watched/listened to the video clip for 15 to 20 minutes at least and after that they continued to do things in order to complete the assignment in the lesson. Importantly, the intensity of the participants' attention was obviously stronger than usual; no one was talking and there were no visible signs of students doing something else while they were watching the video clip. Students later used dictionaries and communicated with other group members in order to complete the assignment (no signs of unwillingness to do the assignment were noticed among any of the participants).

It should be noted here that some participants' attention spans were longer than in other usual lessons by the teacher. In the usual lessons, except the assignments which involved reading passages, all of the participants were usually given 15 to 30 minutes to work on one assignment (e.g., listening, communicating with other group members, presenting their answers as a group). However, some reluctant participants' attention spans in particular were usually three to five minutes; after this period of time they often started to do something else other than the assignments, such as looking down and doing nothing, looking outside through the windows in the classroom, and so on.

The participants' words from casual interviews by the researcher also confirmed the observations above: the assignment in the pilot lesson was 'challenging but interesting', 'watching the video attracted my attention somehow', 'difficult but I could understand what was going on in the video', 'doing something new was inspiring'. There were also some negative comments such as 'I tried hard but it was too difficult for me', but mostly the participants' responses were positive. In short, all these comments from the participants indicated that they all at least tried to figure out what the presenter in the video said even though they could not understand him.

Thus, owing to the intensity of their attention as a whole class and the attention span of some reluctant participants, the participants' attention to the assignment in the pilot lesson was considered

to be higher, compared with their usual attitudes towards the assignments from the textbook.

With respect to the level of English of the video clip used in the pilot study, it seemed to be very challenging for the participants. However, their attitudes to the video were mostly positive and welcoming and the students could answer half of 10 questions correctly as a whole class (Q1 to Q4 and Q6; see Appendix); this might be partly because there were many clues/information indicating the content of the video, such as letters of key points on the screen, movements of the presenter, and other visual information. Considering these aspects, the level of English of the video was somewhat suitable to the participants. However, the material was suitable for occasional use.

Regarding the suitability of the video clip, there is one more point to be mentioned. A few participants showed some frustration with the speed of authentic speech although most participants gave positive responses to the material including its speed. The use of the authentic material in this pilot study was for the one time lesson only and therefore the participants' responses to ongoing use of authentic materials cannot be predicted. Thus, there should be more investigation/experiments on the suitability or level of English of the material which is used for participants or similar students in the future.

3. Conclusion

This pilot study focused on low-achieving and/or basic level EFL students in a non-language-related faculty in a university in Japan. Importantly, some/many of these students usually easily become reluctant to study English in class as discussed in introduction. In addition to the main focus, the main aim of this pilot study was to pre-test and observe if the use of smartphones and the YouTube video clip were appropriate for the lesson in terms of gaining the students' attention towards the listening assignment of the lesson, and regarding the level of English of the video.

As discussed in the last section, I found that the intensity of the participants' attention as a whole class and the attention span of some reluctant participants were stronger/enhanced in the pilot lesson, compared with their usual attention towards the assignments from the textbook. Taking these changed factors into account, the participants' attention towards the assignment in the pilot lesson was considered to be more positive/improved, compared with their attention towards the usual assignments by the teacher. In view of this, there are some possibilities that such improved attention of the students could be the first step leading to long-term improved motivation to study English in the future, in particular, for the reluctant students.

Respecting the level of English of the YouTube video clip used in the pilot study, it seemed to be appropriate for the participants for occasional use based on the researcher's observation and the participants' responses in the interviews by the researcher. However, there were limitations to this study; the use of the video clip was considered to be appropriate, but only for occasional use, because

the data of this study was primarily from one single 90-minute lesson.

The limitations of the pilot study also apply to the findings regarding the students' attention to the listening assignment, as well as the students who were the focus of the study, that is, low-achieving EFL students in a non-language-related faculty in a university in Japan. Therefore, generalisation of the findings of this study to other learner groups or to other tasks may not be appropriate.

However, the findings in this pilot study could provide useful information for selecting listening materials, particularly for low-achieving EFL students in similar contexts. In addition, the findings can be a helpful reference for future related-studies. Importantly, the data which was collected in making the self-completion questionnaires was saved to be used for evaluating/improving listening lessons or materials in the future. The collection of such data was one of the aims of this study, as stated in the introduction.

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Wolff College of Coffee (2018). *Making a Short Black, Doppio, Shlong and Long Black*. Released on 14 Oct. 2018. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zmVND6QoLUM>

Appendix

[Questions about the You Tube video clip and instructions used in the pilot study]

'Making a Short Black, Doppio, Shlong and Long Black' by Wolff College of Coffee

* Please type the underlined part above to search for the correct video clip.

After watching/listening the video clip above, answer the following questions:

- Q1. Which country's coffee drinks does the presenter talk about?
- Q2. What is 'short black'?
- Q3. What does the presenter say about the best way of drinking a cup of espresso?
- Q4. What is 'doppio'?
- Q5. What is 'long black'?
- Q6. What does the presenter say about the crucial point when making a cup of long black?
- Q7. What does the presenter say about long black and Americano?
- Q8. What is 'shlong'?
- Q9. Why does the presenter like shlong?
- Q10. What does the presenter say about black coffee including espresso, doppio, long black and shlong?

**The questions and instructions above were translated from Japanese by the author.