Evaluating a Web-Based Listening Programme

for Chinese University Non-English Majors

Xuefei Wang[*]　*Beijing University of Technology*

Abstract: With the development of information technology, computer-assisted language learning is becoming a trend in foreign language teaching environment. It is argued that characterized by the universal availability of authentic materials, the multimedia capability and the nonlinear (hypermedia) structure of the information, the World Wide Web have the potential to enhance language learning. This paper evaluates a web-based listening programme in terms of language learning potential, learner fit, authenticity and impact. It concludes with the appropriateness of the tasks designed in this programme.

Key words: language learning potential; learner fit; authenticity

1. Introduction

Listening has long been labeled as the major and fundamental skill in language acquisition, but it is still "a neglected stepchild" (Oxford, 1993: 205) and "a Cinderella skill" (Nunan, 1997:47) in our teaching syllabus, which just offers two hours per week of classroom listening input to students. As Rubin (1994) points out, in fact, many language learners are simply not getting enough exposure to listening materials, which is unfortunate since aural input is increasingly being recognized as vital to second language acquisition. Under this condition, supplementary self-access listening materials are highly desired. In the College English Curriculum Requirements (For Trial Implementation), the role of computer-assisted language teaching and learning is highlighted. It argues for the learner-centred, individualized and self-access learning mode of integrating classroom language application with computer and teaching software. The web, an immensely seductive resource for the EFL learner and teacher alike, offers a variety of content, approach and media. The most advantage of web-based instruction is that it promotes learner-centred independent leaning, and thus autonomy – a highly valued goal in this age of the communicative approach (Levy, 1997). The web is an exciting new tool for language teaching: it may have its own problems, but it can add a valuable dimension to face-to-face teaching by providing an environment for meaningful interactive tasks in authentic settings. This paper recommends and evaluates a web-based listening programme that takes into account the crucial aspects of second language acquisition.

2. Evaluation of the Product

2.1 Product Description and Constructivist Learning Model

The hypermedia-based listening programme designed by Randall (http://www.esl-lab.com/guide.htm) is a user-friendly and easily manageable product, which takes a non-linear mode allowing students access different functions and tasks with a click of mouse at their disposal. There are four helpful instructional links in each unit: *Quiz Script, Explanation of Answers, Text Completion* and *Key vocabulary* included in *Quiz Script*. The listening

[*] Xuefei Wang (1972-), female, lecturer of College of Foreign Languages, Beijing University of Technology; research field: corpus linguistics and English language teaching; address: College of Foreign Languages, Beijing University of Technology, 100# Pingleyuan, Chaoyang District, Beijing, P. R. China; postcode:100022.

activities are organized by topic and language function, which can meet students' different individual interests in specific topics and functions. This programme also takes into account students' different language level by categorising real-life learning materials into Easy (E), Medium (M) and Difficult (D). Pre-listening, listening and post-listening are provided for each audio/video text. From the perspective of second language acquisition, this programme is based on schema theory and incorporates constructivist learning model into its design, which allows and encourages learners to build on what they already know and go beyond the simple collection and memorization of information to develop individualized internalized principles (Beatty, 2003). In this programme, learners have greater control and responsibility over what they learn and rely on schemata (pre-existing background knowledge) to select and transform information, create hypotheses and make decision, which is strikingly different from behaviourist learning model, where learning activities are sequenced from simple to complex and the control of the sequences is usually with the programme, not the learner.

2.2 Criteria for CALL Task Appropriateness (Chapelle, 2001)

2.2.1 Criteria one: language learning potential via "noticing" and modified interaction

Language learning potential should be considered the most critical for CALL activities among all the criteria. According to Chapelle (2001), it refers to the extent to which the activity can be considered to be a language learning activity rather than simply an opportunity for language use. Recent SLA studies show that learners need to notice and attend particular linguistic features for acquisition (Schmidt, 1990). The single direct "noticing" in this programme may occur in the task of Text Completion, where students are supposed to supply the missing words while listening to the recording. The attention to the target words may well result in L2 input becoming intake. The other indirect "noticing" in this programme may occur through three ways of modified interaction: face-to-face exchanges and discussion during pre-and post-listening, listening to the material and clicking on the highlighted vocabulary for definition and explanation.

2.2.2 Criteria two: learnerfit

Learner fit takes into account the individual differences in linguistic ability level and non-linguistic characteristics. Skehan (1989) suggests that the teacher chooses tasks that will offer learners an opportunity to work with a range of target structures appropriate to their level. This listening programme fairly matches three levels of linguistic competence by categorising listening materials into Easy (E), Medium (M) and Difficult (D) respectively in each theme-specific unit. Moreover, the technically non-linear design of this hypermedia-based programme also meets individual learning style. They can choose to read the text script first before listening to the material; or they can choose to do the text completion first before doing the multiple-choice comprehension. All in all, this programme can be suitably used with the whole class of different linguistic levels, which fundamentally resolve the problem of traditionally "one-fits-all" listening materials.

2.2.3 Criteria three: authenticity

Authenticity refers to the degree of correspondence between an L2 learning task and tasks that the learner is likely to encounter outside the classroom (Chapelle, 2001). The pedagogical tasks (e.g. travel arrangement, picnic preparation, and making invitation) in this programme reflect a high degree of authenticity, which may help students to gain pragmatic abilities that will serve in communications beyond the classroom. On the other hand the wide range of relevant and interesting authentic materials may help to engage their interest in the target culture in a way that will help develop their willingness to seek out opportunities to communicate in L2. Enhanced motivation will therefore result from the exploration of the audio text, which has risen in the popularity polls in recent literature as a facilitator in the learning process.

2.2.4 Criteria four: impact

Judging from its attempts to increase students' interest, engagement, willingness and motivation, this hypermedia-based listening programme may have a *positive impact* on their acquisition. The learning tasks in this

programme teach more than language; they will help students develop their metacognitive strategies in planning through pre-listening and cognitive strategies in monitoring and evaluating through "top-down" and "bottom-up" processing skills. Given the theoretical justification for tasks, which require use of the target language for communicative language use along with a means for resolving communication breakdowns, these types of L2 tasks hold a unique promise for language teaching. User-requested help (e.g. transcript, definition) allows for the important process of attempting to understand, noticing problems in comprehension, and receiving help in resolving them, which is hypothesized to be beneficial.

2.3 The Weakness of the Design of This Programme

Although this programme gives a generally good impression, it has its problems on student part. In terms of feedback, this programme fails to provide instant feedback function for every single question. Students have to click the "final score" button at the end of the last question if they want to check their answers to just one question, but what displays before them is the answers to all the questions, which interferes with their understanding of the rest part of the text. In this respect, this CALL programme does not fully meet the learners' preferred individual learning styles. Another weakness of this programme is that it fails to anticipate incorrect answers and offer explanations concerning them and hints of various types to lead students to correct answers, which otherwise are desired to be considered in the design criteria for contemporary explicit learning approaches. Although it offers the option of the "Explanation of Answers" link for why correct answers are correct, in some cases, students may still not be convinced of the wrong choices they make. For the cognitively mature students, metalinguistic feedback (Lightbown and Spada, 1999) is therefore more desirable, which provides a certain clue rather than the explicitly correct answer. This type of feedback may involve the occurrence of modified interaction, and facilitate students' language acquisition.

3. Conclusion

From a teacher's perspective, this web-based listening programme is suitable for both university classroom teaching and self-access study, which fully incorporates some significant factors in second language acquisition into its task design, such as "noticing", modified interaction and individual differences. However, although the effectiveness of CALL depends largely on teachers (Jones, 2000), an evaluation argument should be constructed on the basis of both the judgmental and empirical analyses. From this respect, this programme needs to be modified to cater to learner' taste better. The implications are that web-based listening materials have a potentially positive role to play in the curriculum if managed properly, and I do believe it will facilitate effective language learning and teaching in China in the 21st century.

References:

1. Beatty, K. (2003). *Teaching and Researching Computer-assisted Language Learning.* London: Longman

2. Chapelle, C.A. (2001). *Computer Applications in Second Language Acquisition.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

3. Jones, J.F. (2000). CALL and the Responsibilities of Teachers and Administrators. *ELT Journal,* 55(4): 360-367

4. Levy, M. (1997). *Computer-Assisted Language Learning: Context and Conceptualization.* Oxford: Clarendon Press

5. Lightbown, P.M. & Spada, N. (1999). *How Language are Learned* (second edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press

6. Nunan, D. (1997). Listening in language learning. *Language Teacher,* 21(9):47-51

7. Oxford, R.L. (1993). Research update on Teaching L2 Listening. *System,* 22(2): 205-211

8. Rubin, J. (1994). A Review of Second Language Listening Comprehension Research. *Modern Language Journal.* 78(2): 199-221

9. Schmidt, R. (1990). The Role of Consciousness in Second Language Learning. *Applied Linguistics.* (11): 129-158

10. Skehan, P. (1989). *Individual Differences in Second Language Acquisition.* London: Edward Arnold

(Edited by Qunying Zhou and Dongling Zhang)