

## **What Do Students Listen to and Why?: Exploratory Analyses of Students' Listening Journals**

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By analyzing the data of listening journals (LJs) written by the students in the author's two Listening Skills and Strategies classes in winter 2010, this paper attempts to describe their extensive listening behavior, to illustrate the popular listening materials among them, and to reveal their approaches for the assignment. It was found that, as genre, the students liked to listen to news, lectures/presentations, and movies, and that the tendencies of their choice somewhat differed according to their English proficiency and gender. The popularity ranking of listening materials was compiled as well. The reasons for their choice of materials uncovered, to some extent, their attitudes and approaches toward LJs. Interpretations of the findings and implications for future studies are discussed.

Listening Skills and Strategies (LSS) is a course offered in fall and winter as an elective among five Communicative Strategies courses for program A (intermediate in English proficiency) and B (high-intermediate) freshmen at International Christian University (ICU). According to the ELP Handbook, "LSS is designed to help students improve both macro and micro level listening skills and strategies which are essential for study" at ICU (English Language Program, 2011, p. 43). According to the handbook, LSS goals are fourfold: "(a) to provide students with opportunities to listen to different types of speeches such as academic lectures, reports, and news articles, (b) to provide note-taking and note-making skills practice, (c) to provide focused practice on distinguishing English sounds, and (d) to develop effective strategies to promote self-study techniques" (p. 43). In order to fulfill the above objectives, LSS course coordinators provide suggested lesson plans and procedures to LSS instructors at the beginning of each term. Most of the class time is devoted to intensive listening practices to promote top-down and bottom-up listening and to enhance note-making practices. Pre-viewing activities such as group brainstorming and discussion to activate the students' background knowledge are also implemented in class.

One of the assignments given to the students throughout the two terms is the weekly submission of listening journals (LJs)—practices of extensive listening; LJ is "a weekly journal that students keep on the materials in English they listen to outside the ELP class time" (English Language Program, 2011, p. 43). Students can choose any listening materials on their own with the help of links to various internet sites provided on LSS Moodle especially at the beginning of the course. This assignment is for students to receive increased English input "as well as to give an opportunity to reflect on difficulties they experience in listening" (p. 43) and thus has close relationship with the fourth goal of the LSS.

With regard to extensive listening, Field (2008) claims that "the principle is to encourage listening for pleasure and without obligating the listener to keep demonstrating a satisfactory level of understanding" (p. 54). He also states that "the most important

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consideration is that the listener should choose materials which fit her own interest or which relate to areas in which she has sound background knowledge” (p. 54). As Field points out, extensive listening works as a means of fostering listener autonomy. Since nurturing autonomous learners of English is increasing in its importance in Japanese tertiary education in recent years, a considerable potential LJs have in guiding students to be autonomous learners should not be neglected.

This paper aims (a) to give a bird’s-eye view of the students’ listening behavior throughout LSS 2011 winter term, (b) to investigate the differences in and characteristics of the students’ behavior depending on their proficiency and gender, and (c) to elucidate the students’ attitudes and approaches toward LJs through the students’ writing at the end of the term. The three research questions for this study are as follows:

1. Are there any general tendencies in the students’ listening behavior? Are there any differences in their behavior based on their English proficiency and gender?
2. Which listening materials are popular among the LSS students?
3. How did the students perceive and approach the assignment of LJs? How did they choose the listening materials?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

The participants of this study were the students who successfully completed the author’s two winter 2010 LSS classes. Out of the 32 registered students at the beginning of the term, 27 students completed the course, and therefore, only the data from the 27 students were used. As for the breakdown of the students in terms of their English proficiency, 10 students were from program A and 17 from program B. There were 15 female and 12 male students

### ***Data Collection***

The students were required to submit their LJs every week, which consisted 15% of their class grade. Since there were eight LSS class meetings, there were seven submission opportunities. Every week, the author collected the LJs from the students in class, typed in the title/name of the listening materials the students listened to in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, wrote feedback comments on their LJs, and returned the LJs to the students at the beginning of the following class meeting. It was hoped that the data obtained in this way would provide clues for the first and second research questions. Some students listened to more than one material in a week, in which case all the materials they listened to were typed in.

In order to probe the third research question, the author asked the students to recommend listening materials to the incoming freshmen with their reasoning at the last class meeting. Since most of the class time was to be devoted to the Course-Wide Test (CWT), only the students who completed and submitted the CWT were asked to write their recommendation on a voluntary basis. It was made clear that its submission has nothing to do with their test results and grades. A total of 16 students wrote their recommended listening materials.

### ***Data Analyses***

Analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel after the end of the 2010 winter term when all the necessary data were collected. The materials the students listened to were categorized into five genres at my discretion: news, lectures/presentations, movies/drama, English-learning materials, and others. News included overseas news materials from CNN and BBC as well as domestic materials from NHK. The examples of lectures/presentations were the materials from TED.com, *Justice* with Michael Sandel, Yale University's lectures, and the recordings of ELP Narrative Presentation (NP) lectures. Those in the movies/drama category included movies, DVDs, and TV drama series. English-learning materials were programs created for learners of English, which included English-learning website, NHK's educational programs for English learners, and listening CDs for English learners. Others were those which neither fell into any of the above categories nor could be identified with my knowledge or brief internet search. As has been mentioned above, if a student listened to more than one material in a week, all of the materials he or she listened to were included in the data.

In order to answer the first research question seeking general tendencies, the data were analyzed to grasp the big picture, and then were sorted and analyzed by the students' English proficiency and by gender. To answer the second research question seeking popular listening materials, the materials listened to by the students were sorted and analyzed from two perspectives: by the total number of listening (frequency) and by the total number of students who listened.

For the third research question regarding the students' approaches toward LJs, the students' handwritten recommendations of listening materials were typed into a spreadsheet, and the data were sorted by genre. Since there usually were multiple reasons/elements behind the students' recommendations, the following 11 elements were extracted from their writing, labeled at the author's discretion, and used for analysis: enjoyable, interesting, short/appropriate in length, variety of choice, with script/summary, natural/authentic speed of speech, predictable/not-too-difficult content, easy to access/search, relatedness to ELP classes, and cultural awareness.

## **Results**

### ***The Students' Overall Listening Behavior***

The three most popular genres among the students were movies/drama (43%), lectures/presentations (24%), and news (21%), which summed up to 87% of the total number of materials the students listened to. As for the number of materials the students listened to throughout the term, approximately 37% students listened to seven to 13 materials during the term, which means that they listened to at least one material per week with occasional listening to additional materials. One-third of the students listened to 14 to 21 materials during the term, which implies that they listened to two or more materials per week. And 30% of them listened to zero to six materials during the term, missing one or more submission opportunities. It was found that the students listened to 9.6 materials throughout the term on average with a relatively high standard deviation of 5.5. The details are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

### ***Difference in Listening Behaviors by English Proficiency***

As for the genres of listening, it was found that Program A students listened to movies (53%) and English-learning materials (14%) more often than Program B students (36%; 2%), while Program B students listened to News (28%) and Lectures/Presentations (32%) more often than Program A students (10%; 12%). As for the number of materials listened to throughout the term, Program A students viewed slightly more materials (10.6) than program B students (8.9) with a relatively high standard deviation on each (5.5; 5.7). The details are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

### ***Difference in Listening Behaviors by Gender***

As for the genres of listening, male students seemed to listen to news (33%) and lectures/presentations (31%) more often than female students (13%; 19%), while female students were found to view movies/drama (50%) more often than male students (31%). As for the number of materials listened to throughout the term, female students viewed more materials (10.7) than male students (8.1) with a relatively high standard deviation on each (5.6; 5.5). The details are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

### ***Ten Most Popular Materials by Frequency (Number of Total Listening)***

News materials such as those provided by CNN, NHK, and BBC ranked high. Lectures/presentations provided in TED.com and *Justice* also ranked high, with popular movies and drama such as *The Social Network* and the *Harry Potter* series ranking in as well. It should be noted that one student listened to *Trad Japan* (a program on NHK educational channel) and *Columbo* every week, which raised the two programs' ranking. Similarly, another student continued to listen to *Basic English* (an English learning CD series), which affected its ranking positively. The details are shown in Table 3.

### ***Ten Most Popular Materials by the Number of Students' Listening***

Analyzing the popularity from a different perspective brought slightly different results. By counting the number of students who listened to each listening material regardless of frequency, the effect of one or a few students' continuous listening to the same material was eliminated. News materials and lectures remained popular. Well-known movies such as *The Sound of Music* and *Enchanted* newly ranked in. The details are shown in Table 4.

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**Table 1. Genres of the Materials Listened to by Students**

	News	Lectures	Movies	English	Other	Total
Program A	11	13	56	15	11	106
	10%	12%	53%	14%	10%	100%
Program B	42	48	54	3	5	152
	28%	32%	36%	2%	3%	100%
Female	21	31	80	15	14	161
	13%	19%	50%	9%	9%	100%
Male	32	30	30	3	2	97
	33%	31%	31%	3%	2%	100%
Total	53	61	110	18	16	258
	21%	24%	43%	7%	6%	100%

**Table 2. Total Number of Materials Students Listened to Throughout the Term**

# of Students Listened to	0-6 Materials	7-13 Materials	14-21 Materials	Total	Average	St. Dev.	Median
Program A	2	4	4	10	10.6	5.5	7
	20%	40%	40%	100%			
Program B	6	6	5	17	8.9	5.7	7
	35%	35%	29%	100%			
Female	3	6	6	15	10.7	5.6	7
	20%	40%	40%	100%			
Male	5	4	3	12	8.1	5.5	7
	42%	33%	25%	100%			
Total	8	10	9	27	9.6	5.6	7
	30%	37%	33%	100%			

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**Table 3. Ten Most Popular Listening Materials (By Frequency)**

Ranking	Title	Genre	Frequency	%
1	CNN (Student News etc)	News	25	10%
2	TED.com	Lecture/Presentation	19	7%
3	NHK (World News etc)	News	19	7%
4	BBC	News	9	3%
5	Justice	Lecture/Presentation	8	3%
5	Trad Japan	English Learning	8	3%
7	Columbo	Movie/Drama	6	2%
7	The Harry Potter Series	Movie/Drama	6	2%
9	House	Movie/Drama	5	2%
10	Basic English	English Learning	4	2%
10	Alice in Wonderland	Movie/Drama	4	2%
10	The Sound of Music	Movie/Drama	4	2%
10	The Social Network	Movie/Drama	4	2%
Total			258	100%

**Table 4. Ten Most Popular Listening Materials (By Number of Students)**

Ranking	Title	Genre	# of Students	%
1	CNN (Student News etc)	News	10	37%
2	Justice	Lecture/Presentation	6	22%
3	NHK (World News etc)	News	6	22%
4	TED.com	Lecture/Presentation	6	22%
5	The Social Network	Movie/Drama	4	15%
5	BBC	News	4	15%
5	The Harry Potter Series	Movie/Drama	4	15%
5	The Sound of Music	Movie/Drama	4	15%
9	Enchanted	Movie/Drama	3	11%
9	Yale University's Psychology Class	Lecture/Presentation	3	11%
# of students			27	100%

**Table 5. Recommended Materials by Genre and Reasons for Recommendation**

	News	Lectures	Movies	English	Total
# of Students Recommended	5	5	5	1	16
	31%	31%	31%	6%	100%
Reasons for Recommendation					
Enjoyable	0	0	4	0	4
Interesting	1	2	0	1	4
Length (short/appropriate)	1	2	0	1	4
Variety of choice	0	3	0	0	3
With script/summary	1	2	0	0	3
Natural/authentic speed	3	0	0	0	3
Not too difficult	2	0	1	0	3
Easy to access	1	1	0	0	2
Relatedness to ELP classes	0	1	0	0	1
Cultural awareness	0	0	1	0	1
Total	9	11	6	2	28

### *Analyses of the Students' Recommendations*

The listening materials the students recommended basically coincided with the data from their LJs. Out of the four genres described above, lectures, news, and movies were each recommended by five students (31%). As for the reasons for recommendation in general, “enjoyable,” “interesting,” and “short/appropriate in length” were each given by four students. “Variety of choice,” “with script/summary,” “natural/authentic speed,” “not too difficult” were each given by three students.

Reasons for recommendation varied according to the students' recommended materials. Those who liked lectures seemed to be attracted by the “variety” of choice the programs offered. They also indicated that the programs were interesting, short/adequate in length, and helpful with summary. On the other hand, those who chose news programs seemed to like the natural speed of speech. Interestingly, however, some students seemed to choose the news programs which are easier for them to understand—those from NHK, the domestic broadcasting station. The students who recommended movies commented that they are genuinely enjoyable. The data summary is shown in Table 5, and the excerpts from the students' writing are in Appendix A.

## **Discussion**

### *Students' Listening Behavior*

The students' three most popular genres of listening were news, lectures, and movies. Male students and Program B students seem to have listened to news and lectures more often

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than female and Program A students, while female and Program A students viewed movies more often than male and Program B students. This could mean that both gender and English proficiency may have relationship with students' choice of listening materials to some extent. Due to the small number of participants, however, these tendencies could not be generalized unconditionally. The fact that Program A students listened to English-learning materials more often than Program B students deserves attention, as this could imply that they sought and found the materials suitable for their listening ability. In other words, they might have chosen to listen to the materials for English language learners instead of (or in addition to) authentic materials. However, again, due to the small sample size, this interpretation needs further examination.

As for the total number of materials the students listened to throughout the term, a wide range seemed to exist as could be seen in the relatively high standard deviation. In fact, some students failed to submit the LJs many times, while some students worked hard on their LJs every week by listing the new vocabulary they learned, summarizing the content, and writing their reactions or thoughts. Individual differences possibly played a larger role than the differences between Program A and B and between male and female students. However, to further investigate the students' listening behavior, more evidence may be necessary. The students' self-reported total time spent on listening could be utilized for future studies and may lead to a deeper understanding of the students' behavior.

### ***Most Popular Listening Materials***

It is worth noticing that most of the materials (excluding movies) the students listened to were accessible via the LSS Moodle site. This demonstrates the usefulness and effectiveness of this site in guiding the students to the listening materials of their interests. It helps both instructors and students, especially when the assignment of weekly LJs is introduced at the beginning of LSS fall term. The LSS course coordinators' continuous efforts of maintaining and updating this site should not be overlooked. As a matter of fact, the link to *Justice* with Michael Sandel was newly added in 2010 academic year, and it has become a popular listening material among students as can be seen in Tables 3 and 4.

In the author's class, a few occasions were made for the students to share their extensive listening experience in small groups. During the group work, they talked about the materials they listened to, gave a brief summary, and explained why they recommend or do not recommend the materials. In the author's observation, the students were actively engaged in this group work: there were active rounds of questions and answers, especially regarding movies and TED.com. In this way, the students learned from their peers which materials to listen to. Perhaps the popularity ranking of movies was affected by these word-of-mouth recommendations.

Throughout the process of compiling popularity ranking, it was found that some students continued to listen to the same materials throughout the term, while some students changed the listening materials almost every week. The reasons for the differences in their behavior are yet to be identified. Perhaps, after looking for their favorite materials for some time, some students have come to find their favorite programs. Or perhaps, some students may find it bothering and cumbersome to try new materials especially when they are busy with multiple assignments. Another type of students may like to try new materials and search for new contents continuously. In this way, differences in the students' preferred learning styles and personality may have played a role. Investigating the reasons behind their behavior

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may contribute to the better understanding of students and help LSS instructors to provide finer-tuned assistance for them.

### *Students' Approach towards LJs*

The students' approach towards LJs can be glimpsed through the reasoning for their recommended materials. Eight (50%) out of 16 students wrote either, "interesting" or "enjoyable", which may signal that the students found materials which were engaging or entertaining for them. Some of the students might have found their way to enjoy the assignment rather than seeing it as a mere duty. Dörnyei (2001) introduces self-determination theory originally claimed by Deci and Ryan in 1985 and later by Vallerand in 1997. According to this theory, intrinsic motivation "concerns behavior performed for its own sake in order to experience pleasure and satisfaction," whereas extrinsic motivation "involves performing a behaviour as a means to an end, that is, to receive some extrinsic reward or to avoid punishment" (p. 11). According to this theory, "we are more motivated to do something out of our own will than something that we are forced to do (Dörnyei, p. 12). The students' writing may indicate the emergence of intrinsic motivation for listening instead of (or in addition to) extrinsic motivation such as better grades.

Four students wrote that the materials' short or appropriate length was the reason for their choice. This may be related to their maximum limit of time for listening in English while maintaining concentration, for some students may find listening in English a heavy burden. Or, in some cases, the students might have done their best to squeeze a certain amount of time for listening during their busy days. In other cases, the students opted to listen to the same materials multiple times, and for this purpose, short programs would have been favorable.

As for the difficulty of listening materials, two different orientations seemed to exist among the students. One is that of seeking authenticity. Some recommended materials because of the natural speed of speech; they chose overseas programs primarily targeting native speakers of English. The other orientation is that of seeking comprehensibility. One student recommended a material because of the moderate speed of speech. Another student stated that familiar topics such as domestic news helps to predict the content of the news (due to the background information in the listener) and thus contributes to better understanding. Another student chose certain movies for simple and clear speech.

It was revealed that some students exerted additional effort to enhance their understanding of the materials. In order to complement the gap between the content and their understanding, they used summaries or transcripts effectively. By reading summaries in advance, they have activated their background knowledge, learned new vocabulary in advance, and were able to predict the content of listening materials. As for the use of transcripts, some students wrote in their LJs that they read the scripts of the parts of listening materials they did not understand. Similarly, some students wrote in their LJs that they saw movies with English subtitles, which helped them learn new vocabulary and understand the content better.

As has been seen, many students have come to choose the listening materials which are interesting, enjoyable, and level-appropriate for them. Students listened to various materials for various reasons: personal interests and preferences, difficulty or comprehensibility of speech and the content, relatedness to the classes they take, and perhaps convenience. How they have come to choose the materials is yet to be found, and this could be an area for future studies.

### **Conclusion**

Using LJs as a data source, this paper revealed, to some extent, the extensive listening behavior of the author's 2010 winter LSS students, as well as the popular materials listened to by the students. It also attempted to show the reasons for the students' choice of materials through the analyses of the students' recommendation of listening materials. Due to the small number of participants, however, the applicability of the findings is limited. The use of additional types of data with a larger sample size and a statistical software is suggested.

The students' writing uncovered many interesting aspects of their extensive listening practices. Some students seemed to find pleasure in listening to materials in English. Some students have found level-appropriate and comprehensible materials. Some constantly looked for new materials. In sum, the author sees the emergence of autonomous learners and intrinsic motivation for listening in English. As an LSS instructor and a learner of English who walks a few steps ahead of the students and who experienced the value of understanding multiple languages and perspectives, the author hopes that they continue to listen to English even after finishing the intensive curriculum of studying English in the ELP.

### **References**

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**APPENDIX A**  
**Listening Materials Recommended by Winter 2010 LSS Students**

	Name / Title	Medium	Length	Reason(s) for Recommendation
1	TED	Internet	Depends	I can choose any program in TED. There are many interesting programs. I want penguin readers with CD in the library.
2	TED	Internet	Depends	We can choose a lot of lectures in various academic area. Some of the lectures have script that help us understand.
3	TED	Internet	5-15 mins	It has various types of themes/topics/genres. It is usually short, from about 5, 10, or 15 minutes, so it's easy to continue listening to the TED.
4	Justice (Lecture by Michael Sandel)	Internet	1 hr	I recommend this material because it is interesting. The content dealt with in this lecture is related to the content in ELP class, so it is helpful for deeper understandings and the length of lecture is appropriate. Other than "Justice," there are lots of goof materials in Youtube.edu so I recommend them!
5	Academic Earth (University Lecture)	Internet	1 hr	I am not good at using PC...but it is easy for me to search the lecture I want to listen. You can listen the University lecture over ICU! It is very nice, isn't it? You can get the background and summarize of lecture. It is helpful.
6	CNN Student News	Internet	10 mins	You can listen to REAL English (not like English in Japanese classes or ELP). It's great to get used to fast English. (You can't do this in ELP.) Also, this is updated on every weekdays, and always for 10 minutes, so it's easy to continue watching.
7	CNN Student News Transcript	Internet	15 mins	The students who take this course should be beginner of listening. This program has transcript. So it is easier to listen than some programs without transcript.
8	New York Times	Internet	15 mins	It was exciting program and I like the trends in New York. It is really natural English.
9	NHK World News	Internet	5 mins	This program provides us both domestic and international news. Vocabulary used in this web page is not too difficult, and speech speed is moderate. You can get vocabulary and idea (situation) of current affairs, and also you can get used to natural speed of English.
10	NHK News 7 (English version)	TV (NHK)	30 mins	You can watch it everyday and easy to watch. The news deals with Japan's issue mostly, we can understand the contents with some predictions.
11	"Enchanted" & "The Princess and the Frog"	Movie		English spoken by Disney characters is clear and easy to listen to every sentence and word!
12	"Step Brothers"	Movie	1hr 30 mins	Comedy movie. So if you can't listen to English, you can enjoy it.
13	Movies	Movie		If you watch movies, you can touch new world! In addition, watching movies is not like homework (for me).

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14	"Friends"	TV drama (DVD)		Firstly, that's quite fun and funny drama to watch. It's not just a comedy, but sometimes it's moving. Secondly, Japanese people can learn many cultural difference from the drama. It's very typically American drama, so it may be good for ICU students since they meet many students from other cultures.
15	"Gossip Girl"	TV drama	1 hr	Because I just love this drama! Actually, I think any drama is OK if he/she could be fascinated. Because I don't want to the program which I am not interested in even in Japanese, if in English all the less! So I totally recommend using more major program in class too.
16	"Trad Japan" & "Tokyo Fashion Express"	TV (NHK)	20 mins, 30 mins	Both of two are short programs, but it introduced many things I didn't know. If you are interested in fashion, Tokyo Fashion Express is very good program!

\*Please note that grammatical errors of students are not corrected.