

Pervasive CALL Learner Training for Improving Listening Proficiency

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As the amount of freely available online media increases, the need for preparing students to use such material effectively similarly grows. We report here on a study for developing a pervasive learner training component for an advanced ESL listening comprehension course to help course participants work effectively both during and after the course. The training includes technical, strategic, and pedagogical components informed by a set of learner training principles. We determine what students have internalized from the training, what we can learn from students' attempts to become more independent learners, and whether the benefit to students appears to be worth the cost, using data from pre and post surveys, student reports, student meetings, and an interview. We conclude that although there is considerable room for refinement of the process, the overall benefit to students is clear and does indeed outweigh the cost. Further exploration of learner training is therefore warranted.

1. Introduction

The Web has made an incredibly rich collection of often free dedicated and authentic audio and video materials available to language teachers and learners. However, even those who are fairly sophisticated at using digital technology for other purposes may be uncertain of how to exploit these resources effectively for language learning. The present work is based on learner training for an advanced ESL listening course (EFS 693B) taught to international graduate students at Stanford University. The objective was to explore student responses toward a pervasive learner training approach that sought to make their work with online materials more effective during the course and prepare them for continuing to work on their own after the course ended. This paper offers preliminary results of the study.

2. Learner Training Overview

Strategy training for language learners has been broadly implemented since the 1980s. However, the technology environment offers a number of additional opportunities and challenges to learners that require adjustment of established models (e.g., Oxford, 1990). In recognition of this, Hubbard (2004) introduced a set of learner training principles as follows:

- Experience CALL yourself
- Give learners teacher training
- Use a cyclical approach
- Use collaborative debriefings
- Teach general exploitation strategies

For the present study, these principles were embedded within a conceptual framework recognizing three distinct domains of learner training:

- Technical training, *how* to use the options and controls of both general and specific applications on the computer for language learning purposes
- Strategic training, *what* to do to support certain learning objectives, including how to link sequences of strategies (or techniques) into learning procedures
- Pedagogical training, determining specific learning objectives and understanding *why* to use certain techniques and procedures to achieve those objectives.

While the first is unique to the computer environment, the last two can be connected with traditional notions of cognitive and metacognitive strategy training (Oxford, 1990). The main difference is that the notion of pedagogical training here emphasizes the value, at least for advanced learners, of understanding the basis for specific techniques and procedures so that informed choices can be made.

3. Pilot Study

In preparation for the present research, we conducted a pilot study in winter 2008. Over the course of six weeks, subjects adopted and used new techniques over the course of the study and enthusiastically adopted many of the pedagogical concepts introduced. They reported an increased awareness of the listening process and an understanding of effective uses of resources. One sur-

prising result of this study was a realization that subjects' goals for listening were quite diverse, and not always focused on anything more than simple exposure. Many were already engaged in good listening practices, but some reported rather interesting tendencies, such as a reliance on text subtitles in their native language. The results of the study emphasized the importance of characterizing learner training so that it could be accommodate changes both in students and technology.

4. Main Study: Method

The main study took place during the 10-week spring quarter of 2008 (April-June). The subjects were 14 students in two sections of EFS 693B divided into a morning section (3 students) and an afternoon section (11 students: a 12th student in this section chose not to participate in the research). Students were from Korea, China, Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines. Most had come to the US the previous September.

There were three parts to the course: in class listening practice, discussion and learning training; class homework; and individual projects. The projects were negotiated with the student at the first individual meeting, allowing them to pick objectives and material types in line with their needs and interests. They were required to do a minimum of three 40-minute sessions per week and submit weekly reports specifying the objective, materials, time spent, procedures, and comments.

We used a primarily qualitative approach embedded in an action research perspective. Specifically, we sought to answer the following questions

- 1) What evidence is there that students are using materials reflectively?
- 2) What have we learned about our students as learners?
- 3) What evidence is there that students have learned enough to continue on their own?
- 4) What changes could be made next time?
- 5) Is the benefit worth the cost?

Data were collected using a number of different instruments and procedures:

- Pre/post surveys
- Pre/post listening test
- Individual meeting notes and videos (5/student)
- Weekly student reports
- Notes for each class (www.stanford.edu/~efs/693b)
- End of course interview

5. Results and Discussion

Pre-survey. Based on the pre-survey students in the study had the following characteristics. Subjects were very comfortable with computers in general, with most selecting the highest level of “I use computers for almost everything I can.” Besides lectures and presentations, most of their exposure to English was through authentic media, much of which was accompanied by text resources such as subtitles. Further, for online audio or video, more than half of the students reported manually adjusting the size of the player, indicating that one of our “best practices” was already being implemented by these digital natives. Finally, the most common motivation for taking the course was by far a “personal desire to improve listening”.

Student reports and individual meetings. Evidence of reflective learning came directly from the weekly reports, which had prompts for stating objectives, procedures and comments on their individual projects. This was corroborated in the notes taken during individual meetings (the videos of those meetings have not yet been reviewed). There was widespread evidence of experimentation by students, shifts to shorter spans when doing dictations, and recognition that material on familiar topics is better for language learning.

Here are a few examples of the many specific reflections (student names are pseudonyms).

- Harry (on dictations): “When people speak slowly, my failure rate drops (Yeah!)”
- Nathan—kept to old techniques but refined them (e.g., read transcript prior to shadowing)
- Sam—hid subtitles on YouTube videos by dropping the player window
- Will—recognized dictation is not useful if the material is too difficult
- Joe—began questioning shadowing and dropped it in favor of oral summarizing

Exit interview and post-survey. In a post-survey, subjects were asked to rank six factors according to the roles that they played in helping them to understand media. The standard deviations of these rank orders showed that speed and number of times listening had the least variation and tended toward the highest end of the range. However, media type (news / movie / lecture), medium (computer / TV / live), and familiarity with content, had a much higher variation among subjects. These results indicate that the only factors subjects agreed on were speed and number of times

listening, indicating that there are large individual differences for other factors.

In order to get a better idea of how the students reacted to the goals of the course, exit interviews were conducted. Perhaps the most notable result of this interview was the extent to which the subjects gave insightful responses on their own learning processes. Of the 12 subjects interviewed, 10 gave responses that indicated that one of the most valuable things they learned in the course was a way to approach listening. Several subjects reported that they suddenly realized that what they had done in the past was simply listening for entertainment, and could not really be categorized as an effort to improve their skills, but that, with a small amount of awareness and effort, they could transform those experiences into learning opportunities.

Cost vs. benefit. As to costs, there is class time lost to training and collaborative debriefings, and student and instructor time in creating and responding to reports. These seem to be outweighed by the benefits. Students were tested at the beginning and end of the course with a 50-item picture identification instrument. The mean score on the pretest was 59% and on the posttest, 70%, suggesting that substantial progress had been made (though the source of that progress cannot be confirmed in the absence of a control group). Most telling are the positive student impressions of their own progress and the reported desire from many to continue working independently using techniques and procedures learned during the course.

5. Conclusion

It is not clear how well this approach would work with a skill other than listening, with less advanced students, or with students lacking the level of technical proficiency. Nevertheless, for this group at least the value of learner training appears to be supported. Following additional review of the data, this pervasive learner training approach will be further refined when the class is taught again next spring.

References

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