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## Implementing extensive listening in higher education with visually impaired students to enhance listening comprehension and vocabulary

Karla Avalos Charpentier

[kavalos@uh.ac.cr](mailto:kavalos@uh.ac.cr)

Universidad Hispanoamericana de Costa Rica.

Francisco Alberto Chavarría Oviedo

[francisco.chavarria.oviedo@una.cr](mailto:francisco.chavarria.oviedo@una.cr)

Universidad Nacional de Costa Rica

### ABSTRACT

This research was conducted to identify the benefits of extensive listening in the acquisition of vocabulary and listening comprehension in a language classroom for students with a visual impairment. The participants of this research were two students from English courses from a private and a public university in Costa Rica. These students implemented extensive listening and identified important information regarding the impact of the strategy not only in the listening skill but also in output skills such as speaking and writing. A questionnaire, an interview, and a Likert scale were used to collect information. Also, some limitations were found by the participants during the implementation of extensive listening to be consider in future research. Finally, this document provides conclusions researchers got after the implementation of extensive listening by the participants that shed a light to students with a visual impairment in the listening comprehension and vocabulary acquisition process.

### Key Words:

*extensive listening*: listening to all types of videos, audios, and other audial material for leisure, which provides great amount of input for the learner.

*english as a foreign language*: teaching english to students that live in a country where english is not an official language spoken.

*visually impairment*: having a loss, or partial vision.

*visually disabled student*: a student that needs tailored methodology because the range of vision is so low that their needs required adapted material.

Correspondencia: [kavalos@uh.ac.cr](mailto:kavalos@uh.ac.cr)

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## Implementación de la escucha extensiva en la educación superior con estudiantes con discapacidad visual para mejorar la comprensión auditiva y el vocabulario

### RESUMEN

La presente investigación se realizó con el objetivo de identificar los beneficios de la escucha extensiva en la adquisición de vocabulario y comprensión auditiva en un aula de inglés, para estudiantes con discapacidad visual. Los participantes de esta investigación son dos estudiantes de cursos de inglés de una universidad pública y privada de Costa Rica. Los participantes implementaron la escucha extensiva e identificaron información importante sobre el impacto de la estrategia no solo en la habilidad de escucha, sino también en las habilidades de habla y escritura. Para la recolección de información se utilizó un cuestionario, una entrevista y una escala Likert. Además, los participantes encontraron algunas limitaciones durante la implementación de la escucha extensiva para ser consideradas en futuras investigaciones. Finalmente, este documento proporciona las conclusiones a las que llegaron los investigadores después de la implementación de la escucha extensiva por parte de los participantes, y que proveen una guía a estudiantes con discapacidad visual en el proceso de comprensión auditiva y adquisición de vocabulario.

#### **Palabras clave:**

*escucha extensiva: escuchar todo tipo de videos, audios y otro material de audio para el ocio, lo que proporciona una gran cantidad de información para el alumno.*

*inglés como lengua extranjera: enseñanza de inglés a estudiantes que viven en un país donde el inglés no es un idioma hablado oficial.*

*discapacidad visual: tener una pérdida o visión parcial.*

*estudiante con discapacidad visual: un estudiante que necesita una metodología a medida porque el rango de visión es tan bajo que sus necesidades requieren material adaptado*

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a Foreign Language to Visually Impaired Students (VIS) has challenge that most Costa Rican language teachers have faced because of the lack of training teachers have received in this area. There is no doubt about the importance of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Costa Rica. In 2018 *Alianza para el Bilinguismo* was presented by the president as a program in the efforts to enhance EFL teaching, working towards achieving a substantial number of bilingual students in the near future.

This paper shows the importance of English Language Learning being more accessible for all type of students as there has been a larger number of VI students that are opting for a major degree in Higher Education these days. In addition, in some universities in Costa Rica, there has been found that English Courses are mandatory for students to fulfill the requirements for graduation.

Despite facts showing the importance of English Language Learning, visually impaired students are arriving into language classrooms only to find majority of professors do not have a repertoire of strategies to teach students that are VI. Moreover, little research has been conducted on the area of EFL instruction when working with VI students in Higher Education. Thus, making it difficult for VI students to achieve meaningful learning, as well as high levels of proficiency.

Even though in Costa Rica research in the area is not extensive, some scholars from other countries have shed light on several strategies, one of them being Extensive Listening for this strategy allows inclusivity and instructiveness as well as meaningfulness in the language learning process.

The purpose of this paper is to show the language learning benefits on vocabulary and listening comprehension of two EFL visually impaired students that arise from the implementation of Extensive Listening in the EFL language classroom.

## OBJECTIVES

- Identify the benefits extensive listening brings in the acquisition of vocabulary and listening comprehension in English.
- Recognize the impact extensive listening has in other areas such as speaking and writing.
- Examine limitations when using Extensive Listening in the English Language Teaching/Learning process.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Brief History of the Teaching of English to Visually Impaired: Strategies and Resources.**

Teaching EFL to Visually Impaired or Blind students has been explored by several authors that have stated different strategies during the past years in order to provide insights on their implementations, as well as the benefits and implications these strategies have during the learning process.

Some investigators on this field that have advocated the importance of the use of strategies when teaching the ELLs are Maxson and Tedder (1993). These two researchers carried out an investigation with the purpose of finding out what teaching strategies were preferred by teachers when working with a visually impaired or blind student. Their findings portray that some teachers, 58% of the population being studied, had a preference for the structure-based teaching techniques such as repetition. While teaching strategies in which using of senses are involved or sensory input is given to the student were preferred by some other teachers, 15% of the population. These two authors concluded that even though there was no explanation for the difference in the preference of the use of the two different strategies. They believe that the preference of the structure-based strategy lies in the teachers' familiarity with this strategy. Repetition seemed to be preferred by majority of teachers, as it has been a strategy that has proven to be fruitful when teaching VI students.

Conroy (2006), a specialist who has gone deeply in this area, provides several strategies when teaching a visually impaired or blind student. According to her, one important teaching strategy that should be used by teachers is the implementation of realia in the learning. She discusses that using concrete objects to learn abstract information helps the student to prop up their thinking and also use all the senses in the learning (p. 104). As stated above, teachers need to use material that VI students can play with, touch, smell or provide any interaction so different concepts or even vocabulary can be learnt in a more meaningful way. Using realia reinforces learning and helps students have a full complete language experience.

Other scholars that advocate the use of concrete material in the classroom are Cox and Dykes (2001). They stated: "using tactile [...] input can provide students with information about objects they come in contact with and use" (p. 72). In addition, according to them, the student becomes more familiar with the objects being studied using their tactile

senses. As seen before, if the use of objects and realia are extremely helpful for a VI student, it might as well provide many benefits for students without any visual impairment. Therefore, bringing activities in the classroom that include realia and tactile materials provide several benefits for both learners, as well as bridging the gap of negligence of VI learners in the EFL language classroom.

In another case study conducted with two students from universities in Izmyr, Turkey, Kocyigit, & Artar (2015) discuss the use of Braille in order to enhance the language learning process, nonetheless, they also claim the implementation of braille might have some limitations since the use of it relies on how well the students can use it. They also state that: “the differences the VILs hold underline that there is no single technique that would fit to all VILs and it is the teachers’ task to identify the strengths and weaknesses of these learners and vary their teaching accordingly”. (p. 692)

Even though most researcher around the world have used strategies which involve the use of concrete materials, realia and even braille, most cases of teaching these days have deviated towards the use of JAWS, which is a screen reader program that enables VI students to listen to the texts they have in their computers. Susanto and Nanda (2018) in their ethnographic case study found out students preferred using computer assisted programs since it facilitates their learning process. Authors claim that students state that: “all materials are difficult, but we used NVDA and JAWS to help us. These students realized that learning materials in the classroom were not easy, but the screen reader technology can help them to get various materials from any resources for learning English.” (p. 86) As seen above, technology has made its way into the language classroom through the creation of programs that allow VI students to have access to the subject matter and resources, hence, bridging the gap of material scarcity that used to exist when using other sources such as Braille books, etc.

In conclusion, theorist have provided strategies, both resources and technology, which are useful for teachers in the EFL language classroom and in one-on-one classes when teaching a VI student.

## **2.2. Extensive Listening in English Language Teaching**

Listening has been widely used by many scholars in several studies since it has shown substantial benefits can arise from its use. Rankin (as cited in Bozan 2015) found that listening was the most dominant skill of language used in human communication; it has

only become popular in the second/foreign language field in recent years. In ELT, the use of listening has been known to have an impact in the other skills such as grammar, vocabulary acquisition, motivation amongst others.

Lately, more scholars are advocating for the use of extensive listening, which can be defined as listening extensively to a variety of media for pleasure. Another definition provided by Renandya and Farrell (2011) is “all types of listening activities that allow learners to receive a lot of comprehensible and enjoyable listening input.” In extensive listening students can choose the material they want to listen which makes it more engaging and motivating for them. The authors mentioned above found beneficial for students to choose what they will be working on, and stated the following:

What is amazing is that the students obtain all these benefits by simply doing something that is pleasurable. They just read anything that they find enjoyable. The only condition is that they should choose reading materials that they can understand on their own and that they read a lot of these materials. In other words, they do a lot of practice in comprehension, not practice in incomprehension as many EFL students often complain about their skills- or strategies-based reading lessons. (p.56)

Some other authors such as Povey (2016) provide insights on how accessible the assessing of extensive listening is. He states:

Tracking progress is also possible online, from the use of questions embedded with the media to self-reporting on message boards or with student response systems. These sources and tools are mostly free and easy to use, meaning there is no financial barrier of entry for teachers and the students beyond Internet access and the common devices needed.

As stated above, extensive listening is easy to report by students since there are many ways in which it can be performed. Students can make use of documents online, which are accessible and free.

There are many types of material and media that can be used in extensive listening such as audios, movies, songs, graded readers, ebooks, etc. Takaesu (2013) promotes the use of TED talks in the ELT and in her findings she claimed that: “it is noteworthy that the TED lectures motivated some students to independently pursue their own interests and spurred some to further research” (p.157). As observed before, TED talks fostered

motivation as well as desire in students to keep on studying material. One of the greatest aspects of the use of extensive listening is the amount of diverse materials that exist for students to have access to.

### **PARTICIPANTS**

The participants for this study consisted of one senior university student from Universidad Nacional of Costa Rica and one student from Universidad Hispanoamericana. The student took English courses since these are mandatory in the majors. The students were purposely chosen since there had been prior opportunities to work with them and expressed willingness in participating in the research. Moreover, they considered the study of great importance and that it could bring a repertoire of ideas for other professors to learn and implement in the future in their EFL language classrooms.

### **DATA COLLECTION**

In the first stages of the research, an instrument and a questionnaire were used to collect information on the participants' educational background as well as English studying habits. A listening report form was then implemented during the second stage of the research. The students participated actively delivering listening reports to keep track of the different audiovisual materials they listened to. In the last stage, a Likert scale was applied to gather data on the participants' perceptions towards the implementation of extensive listening. In addition, the scale showed a comparison between studying and listening habits from the beginning and at the end of the research.

### **Findings and Discussion**

#### **Extensive Listening Implementation – Likert Scale**

Regarding the Likert scale the participants were given several statements related to the implementation of extensive listening. The participants strongly agreed in all of the statements presented which overall represents a very positive attitude towards the use of extensive listening. The participants agreed that extensive listening is easy to use, as well as recommending it because of its accessibility. In addition, they stated that extensive listening provided good results in vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills, while being fruitful their overall English performance as the input they previously learned could be later use in output activities.

### **Final Interview**

During the final interview, participants stated there were several benefits that arose from the implementation of the strategy, the most important one for them being the sharpening of the ear. The participants stated that before started using extensive listening, words in English were just sounds to them, nonetheless, as the implementation was progressing, so were the listening comprehension skills improving. They later claimed that after a while, words stopped being sounds and they were able to understand the meaning of some of them. "Simply listening to comprehensible materials through simple and familiar classroom activities such as dictation and reading aloud can improve EFL students' listening skills" (Renandya, 2012, p.56 ). As stated before, extensive listening and the use of easy listening activities enhances listening skills, hence developing comprehension. In addition, as they understood more words, acquiring them through constant listening and practice, participants could identify the main ideas of audio materials. This can be seen in a experiment in which students, who were exposed to extensive listening activities, versus students that were not, stated that "they were better able to understand because they were able to 'catch' the words more quickly" (Renandya, 2012, p. 57). Participants expressed that even when not knowing every single word of a song or video, by identifying most of them, they managed to infer ideas and meanings in the audios easily.

When asked about the limitations or challenges faced during the process, participants claimed there were neither limitations nor challenges encountered as audiovisual materials are easy to access. However, the participants recommended for the listening reports to be sent in two forms either through a Whatsapp audio or in a word document. They said it was easier to send in the reports through Whatsapp. Nevertheless, they believe some other participants might want to do the reports through word documents, so it will be good to leave the two options available.

Regarding question 3 about studying habits, the participants expressed that extensive listening positively effected their English studying habits. They went from listening to any audio during the week to listening to at least three audios per day. Moreover, the participants also stated that using extensive listening made them very motivated, and that as time was progressing, they felt more confident. Ramirez & Alonso "concluded in a study with young, lower-level learners that EL may improve concentration, attention,

and motivation” (as cited in Povey, 2016, p. 37). As seen before, one of the many benefits of Extensive Listening is that it fosters motivation in students, as happened in the participant’s case.

With reference to question 4 dealing about the recommendation of the use of the strategy, participants said they would highly recommend extensive listening to enhance vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension. They indicated that its accessibility and easiness are the reasons why they recommend it. Likewise, the participants stated that for VI students, the main skills they have developed is their listening skill; however, this would be for Spanish since their case, little practiced occurred prior this project. Nonetheless, he claimed that since listening is a forte for them (referring to VI students in general), it is a great starting point for using extensive listening to work and develop other set of skills. Povey (2016) has also argued: “listening could be called the gateway skill to language. It is the natural precursor to speaking and a key factor in the early stages of language development” (p. 35).

Furthermore, aside from the recommendation of extensive listening, the participants believed this strategy helped develop other areas such as speaking and writing. Bozan (2015) in her study from extensive listening concluded: “the results demonstrated extensive listening had a positive effect on the development of language skills” (p.48). The participants asserted that through listening, they acquired substantial input, which could be later added in speaking and writing settings.

Finally, in question 6, the participants pointed out several reasons why this should be implemented with VI students. First, it can be done at home or in any place individually, so there is no fear of being in front of people or feeling judged while participating in a group activity. In addition, the fear later, as one is learning more and more, starts fading of, allowing one to feel more comfortable and confident. Second, since it is extensive listening, and not intensive listening, one can listen to material one wants to hear and not audios that are sent as homework or as a task. Third, and last, the program JAWS can be configured in English, so one can even use JAWS always in English and get in some more extra practice from listening to the commands, etc.

As a result, the participants moved from being almost inactive when it came to either studying English or listening to songs or videos, and after the implementation of extensive

listening the students showed a huge improvement on the number of days and audio materials they either accessed or practiced with.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Extensive listening has a positive effect on listening comprehension. Listening comprehension develops as the strategy is used, helping the students moving from understating one or two words to many of them. In addition, as the ear sharpens, so does the facility of recognizing not only words but also main or secondary ideas in listening material.

Furthermore, extensive not only helps with listening comprehension but it promotes vocabulary acquisition as well. By listening to different type of audios, the participants are exposed to a big diversity of words that can be learned. Since audios are always available, the students can listen and relisten to the material as many wants as the participants want so that way they can review and reinforce new vocabulary.

As more vocabulary is learned, this one can be put into practice in any speaking or written activity such as an oral presentation, a conversation, an email or even a paragraph. Based on these premises, the implementation of extensive listening proves to be of great help when improving the proficiency in other areas such as speaking and writing, showing how positively these areas are effected by its use.

In addition, the use of this strategy is beneficial for visually impaired students as it is based on a skill that has already been sharpened, as listening is the main skill they use for their daily activities. The participants stated since he constantly had to do everything with my ears, having to learn through listening was not something new.

As participants use the strategy constantly, listening habits regarding English are impacted positively. There is an increasing in the time spent when working with audios and materials from any website, which fosters motivation. The more the students become able to interact with the listenings, the more the students want to keep on practicing with audios.

Moreover, extensive listening is very accessible as one can use a cellphone, computer, an Ipad or any type of gadget in order to listen to material. In addition, it has no limitations to its use and it does not bring challenges as the participants are allowed to choose the pace and type of audios.

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