Creating Online Narrow Listening Libraries*
by
Alan BESSETTE**
Faculty of Information Science and Technology
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Abstract
Online narrow listening libraries provide students with easy access to opportunities to listen to different speakers talk about the same topic. This kind of listening library has potential benefits for increasing students' comprehension and motivation. This paper describes the online listening library that was developed at Poole Gakuin University. It explains why narrow listening libraries can be beneficial to learners and describes how the narrow listening library has evolved at the university. The paper’s main focus is a description of the features of a narrow listening library. Finally, the paper concludes with future steps that will be taken to expand and improve the Poole narrow listening library. It is hoped that the paper will encourage and guide other teachers in creating their own narrow listening libraries.

Keyword: narrow listening, online listening libraries, Moodle
Introduction

A narrow listening library is a collection of listenings about different topics that are of interest to students and that have been recorded by different speakers. There are several listenings on one topic and the listenings are brief, usually about two to three minutes. When the listenings are recorded, the speakers are asked to speak naturally and usually without a script. Making the listenings available online provides students with a learner-centered activity that can be readily accessed with a computer. With a narrow listening library students are free to decide when they want to listen, how many times they listen, and which topics they listen to.

This paper will briefly offer a rationale for making narrow listenings available to students and trace the evolution of the narrow listening library at Poole. Its primary purpose is to describe the narrow listening library on the Poole Gakuin University English website with the hope that teachers can use this example to create and offer their own narrow listening libraries.

Rationale

Narrow listening is based on the same rationale that motivates Krashen’s (2004) narrow reading. He defines narrow reading as reading one author or one topic extensively and argues that narrow reading helps learners because language, e.g., structures and vocabulary, is recycled and the recycling aids comprehension (Krashen, 2004). Krashen (1996) defines narrow listening as listening many times about a single topic. He asserts that narrow listening provides the same recycling of structures and vocabulary as narrow reading. The potential for recycling can be illustrated with one of the topics, food. Three of the six speakers mention not liking natto and in all of their explanations for not liking it words and phrases such as sticky, strong tasting, and smelly are present. In other listenings, for example, past activities and future activities, the same grammar features appear over and over again. Learners benefit from narrow listening because it recycles input and that, in turn, makes the input more comprehensible, an important factor for language acquisition.

Not a lot of research on narrow listening has been done, but two studies support Krashen’s proposals. Dupuy (1999) offered students of French the opportunity to use narrow listenings. Dupuy’s learners reported that narrow listening was helpful in improving their French. Moreover, they made significant gains in listening comprehension after using narrow listening. Another study had similar results. Caspino (2005) reported that a majority of his students found narrow listening helpful for their listening comprehension.

A second reason for considering narrow listening is student motivation. Krashen (1996) explains that second language learners, especially beginning and intermediate learners, often find authentic conversations difficult to understand. Also, he says that language classes sometimes move too quickly through textbooks and topics for students to assimilate what is being taught. These difficulties can lead to a loss in student motivation. Because students control their learning when they use narrow listenings narrow listening can help students overcome those difficulties and can be motivating. Dupuy (1999) quoted his students as saying:

• Narrow listening is more interesting and it allows to listen more carefully.
• It helps me to listen to people speaking French fluently even if I’m unable to understand everything they say.
• Narrow listening helps me feel better about French.

In addition, the students at Poole Gakuin University were informally polled and their opinions were similar.

• I was surprised at how much more I could understand with each listening.
I liked that I could listen many times. I hate listening in class because never enough times.

Although the empirical evidence for narrow listening is not that strong, students’ reactions to using narrow listening and its potential positive effect on students’ motivation make a strong case for offering narrow listening.

Evolution of the narrow listening library at Poole

Narrow listening was initially offered as a supplementary activity to first year students in an elective English class. The students were asked to brainstorm three or four questions on a topic that interested them. The students came up with questions related to six topics: Canada, Vancouver, Food in England, Tea time in England, Movie locations for Harry Potter, and American high school proms. Because the topics were specialized, it was necessary to provide speakers with scripts. The instructor wrote scripts to answer the questions and found two or three speakers to record each script. The listenings are a little longer than most of the latter listenings, four to five minutes as compared to one to two minutes. Students were given the listenings on CDs or MDs and were advised to listen a minimum of 8 times. They were also provided with a listening log (Appendix A).

At that point other instructors became interested in the project and the listenings were expanded and moved to the Poole English Web site (http://www.poole-englishweb.com). Moving the listenings to a website makes the listenings more accessible to students and is more practical than recorded media such as CDs or MDs. Students can listen at any computer connected to the Internet or they can download the listenings to an mp3 player or burn them to a CD. Teachers are free from making CDs or MDs for all of their students. Once the listenings have been recorded and edited, teachers only have to upload the listenings to the website.

The listening topics were chosen to match topics covered in the students’ speaking classes. There are now 20 topics with 59 listenings. The listening topics are common to many beginning and intermediate speaking textbooks and include topics such as vacations, shopping, movies, hometowns, food, etc. The newer listenings are shorter than the first ones, about one to two and a half minutes. All of the newer listenings are unscripted.

Narrow listening library

Listenings

Each listening is made up of three components, focus questions, listenings and quizzes. The focus questions consist of three or four questions. For example, the focus questions for one topic, vacations, are:

- Where did you go on your last vacation?
- Who did you go with?
- What did you do?
- How long did you stay?

These questions have two purposes. The first is to guide the speakers so that the listenings are similar. Second, they provide learners with an advanced organizer to facilitate comprehension (Vandergrift, 2004).

For the listenings, the speakers are asked to speak for about one to two minutes, at a natural speed and without a script. The purpose of the last two requests is to have listenings that include all of the stops and starts, pauses, mistakes, etc., of natural language. The listenings are recorded in a recording studio with the editing software program, Audacity, and saved as mp3 files. Then, they are uploaded to the website.

The third component, quizzes, is optional and was added in response to a student request to have some way to test her understanding. The quizzes are created within Moodle, a course management system, which is
used to manage the website. The quizzes are short with five multiple choice or true/false questions and are specific to one listening. Students have two chances to take the quizzes although the instructor can decide how many times the quizzes can be taken.

Recording and Editing

As mentioned above, the listenings are recorded using Audacity a free, open-source recording and editing software. Audacity can be used with Windows, Linux and Mac operating systems. It is very user-friendly and information about where to download the software and the user’s manual is in Appendix 2. Here important controls and features are explained. The audio control buttons are defined below in Table 1.

Table 1 (from Audacity Help)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Audio Control Buttons</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skip to Start - moves the cursor to time 0. If you press Play at this point, your project will play from the beginning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Play - starts playing audio at the cursor position. If some audio is selected, only the selection is played.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop - if you hold down the Shift key, the Play button changes to a Loop button, which lets you keep playing the selection over and over again.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Record - starts recording audio at the project sample rate (the sample rate in the lower-left corner of the window). The new track will begin at the current cursor position, so click the “Skip to Start” button first if you want the track to begin at time 0.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pause - temporarily stops playback or recording until you press pause again.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stop - stops recording or playing. You must do this before applying effects, saving or exporting.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skip to End - moves the cursor to the end of the last track.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For recording, the most important control is the mixer toolbar. The mixer toolbar is located just under the audio control buttons. Figure 2 below indicates the location of the mixer toolbar and shows a short recording. The mixer toolbar is important because it controls the recording level. It is important to adjust the recording level so that the sound waves do not extend beyond the vertical levels of one and minus one.

![Fig. 2](image)

In Fig. 2 arrows indicate four places where the sound waves extend beyond minus one. When the sound waves extend beyond these levels the sounds are clipped and this will result in distortion. Although Audacity has various features that can improve the sound quality of a recording, the distortion from clipped sound waves cannot be fixed. Thus, it is worthwhile to do a sound recording check to make sure that the recording level is good.

The editing shortcuts are along the top and to the right of the mixer toolbar; they are also available from the Edit pull-down menu. Fig. 3 shows each of the shortcuts.

![Fig. 3](image)

From left to right the shortcuts are: cut, copy, paste, trim away audio outside the selection, silence the selected audio, undo, redo, zoom in, zoom out, fit selection in window and fit project in window.

In addition to the editing shortcuts, there are several effects that can be used to enhance a recording. They can be accessed from the Effects pull-down menu. For
creating the listenings though, there is only one that is essential and that effect is the amplify effect. This effect can be used when the recording is too low. Figure 4 is a screen shot of a recording before the amplifying tool has been applied. Audacity makes a recommendation that will prevent the recording from being clipped. Finally, once the listening has been recorded and edited, it can be saved as an mp3 file.

The key to making good recordings is to adjust the recording level before recording. As long as the sound is not clipped, the only editing that is usually necessary is cutting out long sections of silence, usually at the beginning or the end of a recording, or unwanted noises or amplifying sections where the recording is too low.

Website

Once the recordings are edited and saved as mp3 files, they are ready to be uploaded to the website. The website is located at http://www.poole-englishweb.com and it is a Moodle site. Moodle is a free, open-source course management system. Like Audacity, it is user-friendly and has extensive support and documentation available. Links to where it can be downloaded and to its documentation are listed in Appendix 2.

After students have logged into the website and proceeded to the Narrow Listening course, they are presented with a brief explanation of narrow listening and tips on how to use the narrow listenings. See
forum announces updates to the topics. Students who use the narrow listenings are automatically subscribed to all of the forums on the site and receive email summaries of all posts. The Listening Log link allows students to download the Listening Log (see Appendix 1). Finally, there is a forum for general questions about the narrow listening. Problems with the site, downloading files, etc. can be posted there.

Figure 7 is a screenshot of what students see when they go to the vacations topic. There is a brief explanation of the topic followed by the focus questions. Next, students see a list of the listenings and quizzes for each of the listenings. The initials for each of the listenings identifies the speakers and the time in parentheses tell students how long the listening is. Clicking on the listening opens the listening in another window. Students are given information about the speakers’ nationality and sex in the new window and the listening begins to download. After downloading, usually less than a minute, the listening is played in the Moodle media player. In that window there is also a direct link to the listening file that students can click on to download. The file then can be copied to any mp3 player. At the very bottom of the list of listenings and quizzes, there is a forum for the Vacations listenings. Students can post comprehension questions or questions about vocabulary. Students can listen as many times as they want.

After listening, students can attempt the quiz. As stated above, the quizzes consist of five multiple-choice or true/false questions. Part of the first vacations quiz, Vacations – AJB is shown here (fig. 8).

Fig. 7

Fig. 8

Vacations
Listen to those people talk about vacations. As you listen, try to answer these questions:

1. Where did you go on your last vacation?
2. Who did you go with?
3. What did you do?
4. How long did you stay?

Vacations - AJB (1m48s)
Vacations - AJB
Vacations - PBS (1min26s)
Vacations - PBS
Vacations - RA (1m51s)
Vacations - RA
Vacations - AMT (2m05s)
Vacations - AMT
Vacations - F&B (2m49s)
Vacations - F&B
Vacations - EM (2m40s)
Vacations - EM
Vacations
Future directions and conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning, there are now 59 listenings in the library and new listenings will be added in the future. The same kinds of listenings, a speaker talking about a topic, will be added, as will conversations about similar topics. As the library grows, one potential problem is how to guide students in choosing listenings that are at an appropriate level. At present, the length of each listening is provided on the assumption that longer listenings are more difficult since the amount of information that needs to be processed is greater. However, providing students with listenings marked for a specific level would be more helpful. Moodle has a survey activity that can be used to collect students’ ratings of how difficult the listenings are. This information will make it easier for students to choose listenings appropriate for their level. Other plans for improving the library includes adding vocabulary glosses, images and maps to help student comprehension.

Finally, visiting the Poole English Web website and exploring it should clarify any questions that this paper has not answered. The website can be accessed at http://www.poole-englishweb.com and guests can log in to the website and visit the narrow listening library. Visitors need to log in as guests and then go to the course categories on the left side of the site. Clicking on classes will bring up a list of classes including the Narrow Listening class. Questions about the website can be sent to bessette@poole.ac.jp.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Anne-Marie Tanahashi for her help with the website and for her help in preparing and presenting on narrow listening libraries at TESOL 2007 and my colleagues at Poole Gakuin University who volunteered to be speakers for the topics.
Appendix 1

LISTENING LOG

Name: ______________________________________________________  Student No: _________________________

Topic that you listened to: ______________________________________________________________________

After listening, how much could you understand?  Give yourself a number between 0 and 10 on how much you understood.

0 = couldn’t understand anything  10 = could understand almost everything.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</th>
<th>0</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4th</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5th</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th</td>
<td>After listening to ALL the speakers how much could you understand?</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
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</table>

After the 8th listening you may listen more if you want to.  However, if you understand almost all of the listening, it is better to do a different topic.  When you have completed this form give it to your teacher.  Are you ready to answer the questions about the listening?

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1 Tanahashi, 2007.
Appendix 2

Resources for Narrow Listening Libraries

Audacity download and user manual links:
http://audacity.sourceforge.net/
http://audacity.sourceforge.net/help/documentation
LAME encoder (necessary for exporting mp3 files)
http://www-users.york.ac.uk/~raa110/audacity/lame.html

Moodle:
http://moodle.org/ - Download is available here.
http://docs.moodle.org/en/Administrator_documentation - Manual for administrators

FTP:
Moodle limits uploads to files of 2 MB. Since most listening files are bigger than 2 MB, a FTP (file transfer protocol) software program is necessary. FileZilla is a fast and reliable FTP for Windows. Like Audacity and Moodle, it is open source and is free.
http://filezilla.sourceforge.net/

Other listening libraries:
Below are links to three other listening libraries.
http://www.elllo.org/index.htm: Over 700 listenings with slide shows, quizzes and text.
http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/index.html: Short news listenings with quizzes and activities
http://www.esl-lab.com/: Listening quizzes categorized by level
REFERENCES


