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Using Free Online Materials as the Basis of an Upper-Level IEP Listening and Speaking Course

Freely available online videos are the basis of an Intensive English Program (IEP) listening and speaking course described in this article. Strands and activities of this course could easily be adapted for use in other institutions. For each strand of the course, rationales are stated, activities are described, and suggested online resources are listed.

Introduction

Online authentic video materials hold great potential to enrich Intensive English Program (IEP) listening and speaking instruction, as has been noted by a variety of authors. One advantage of online videos, according to Smidt and Hegelheimer (2004), is student control over video playback. Many authors (e.g., MacDonald, Badger, & White, 2000) emphasize the importance of the visual mode in video recordings for listening comprehension. Flowerdew and Miller (1997) emphasize that actual recordings of university lectures are an important facet of academic ESL preparation. Although online video resources primarily provide direct practice in listening skills, they can be used as the basis for developing course strands in both listening and speaking.

For the last four years, I have been teaching and revising an IEP speaking and listening course based entirely on academic videos freely available from the Internet. In this article, I would like to share my lessons learned from this process. The course has six strands: extensive listening, intensive listening, note taking, interaction, language-focused speaking practice, and vocabulary development. These strands are tied together into several units with content themes based on video recordings from the Internet. My specific context is an IEP class that immediately precedes university enrollment, with students at a proficiency level ranging from intermediate to upper-intermedi-

ate, and sometimes lower-advanced; however, many of the activities and resources I describe are adaptable to other contexts and proficiency levels. I will describe the course strands, indicating a rationale for each, along with suggested activities and sources for materials. It is my hope that readers will be inspired to use more of the wealth of materials available online to enrich the listening and speaking activities offered to their students.

Course Strands

Extensive Listening

There has been a great deal of interest in recent years in including a program of extensive *reading* for ESL students in literate skills courses. One idea behind extensive reading practice is to help learners automatize their decoding processes by repeating the process over and over without struggling (see e.g., Nation, 2009, ch. 4). Students improve their reading skills simply by reading a great deal of material that they find enjoyable and comprehensible, gaining “practice in comprehension, not practice in *incomprehension*” (Renandya & Farrell, 2010). Along the same lines, Renandya and Farrell (2010) call for a greater emphasis on extensive *listening* in ESL listening instruction, so as to provide sufficient practice and to reduce learners’ frustration with repeated attempts to understand material that is too difficult.

To practice extensive listening, students can be encouraged to select appropriate listening materials from the many resources, both authentic and graded, that are freely available online. In my class, students keep a chart recording one to two hours a week of independent, extensive, online listening. The chart includes columns for time spent, source URL of the listening text, a one-sentence summary, comments on the student’s opinion of the listening, and a new word or words that the student noticed while listening. Every week, students submit their charts to be checked and make a brief post to an online voice board about some interesting thing they heard. At the middle and end of the term, students gather in small groups to share sources for interesting video/audio materials and reflect on what they are gaining from extensive listening. It would also be possible to design more in-depth assignments around extensive listening, for example, having students present summaries to the class of the most interesting stories they hear, or create advertisements for the best sources of interesting listening material, or keep a more detailed journal of listening experiences. The important thing in this strand is that learners are encouraged to abandon any material that is difficult or uninteresting and to enjoy listening for general meaning.

The Internet is an excellent source for extensive listening materi-

als. The wide variety of materials and topics available make it more likely that learners will find resources that truly fit their preferences and interests. Beginners and intermediate students can be directed to a wealth of ESL listening resources, such as the following.

- Randall's Listening Lab: <http://www.esl-lab.com/>—a great many ESL listening clips graded by level (easy, medium, difficult). No transcript, but quiz questions for many recordings.
- Voice of America special English: <http://learningenglish.voanews.com/>—news in simplified, slowed English. Transcripts provided.
- ESL podcast sites, e.g., http://www.eslpod.com/website/index_new.html—many hundreds of very slow but not-so-simple podcasts—transcripts available only with registration.
- <http://iteslj.org/links/ESL/Listening/Podcasts/>—a collection site with links to many ESL podcasting sites.

From the intermediate level on, many students will be able to find authentic materials that are of interest to them and easy enough to listen for general understanding. My upper-intermediate students have enjoyed listening to the following resources, among others. More advanced ESL podcasts are also appropriate for these learners.

- Documentary videos from PBS (www.pbs.org)—often captioned
- Stories from NPR (<http://www.npr.org/>)—transcripts or summaries are often provided
- Video series from <http://www.youtube.com/>, for example, tech-support videos for computer products
- TED talks (<http://www.ted.com/>)—captioned and subtitled
- News stories (available on TV and on the web)
- Fictional TV shows or movies (available on TV and the web)

Intensive Listening

In addition to enjoying easy materials, ESL students need to listen carefully to short and challenging texts in order to work on problem areas in their listening skills. An intensive listening strand can include cloze exercises, dictations, close listening to short extracts from recorded materials, and listening for aspects of pronunciation. Field (2008) divides listening skills into two broad categories—decoding and meaning building; intensive listening activities should be based on a diagnosis of a listening problem in either of these areas. For example, do learners have trouble in recognizing words that they do

know, or in dealing with unknown words? Are learners failing to re-evaluate incorrect hypotheses about input, or to recognize hierarchical discourse structure? Intensive listening exercises should be short and purposeful (Field, 2008), focusing on an area of need that is common in the class.

A variety of online materials lend themselves well to intensive listening practice, including short-format documentaries, interviews, lecture excerpts, and minimal pair exercises. For my course, I often prepare cloze transcripts of short (5-15 minute) documentary videos by removing words according to a specific focus (e.g., words with inflected endings, strings of function words, important unknown words, stressed words) and assign these as homework. Students simply click the link, listen, and type the missing words into a Word file. Short, challenging recorded speeches such as answers to interview questions can be used for intensive listening activities focused on a speaker's purpose, and on strategies for dealing with challenging texts. In addition, brief excerpts taken from online lectures may be appropriate for intensive listening because of special lexical, grammatical, or acoustical challenges. For example, in my experience lecture segments focused on logistical announcements (such as changes in office hours, or scheduling of study sessions) are often delivered more quickly and informally than academic content, and with more background noise (at the beginning or end of class). For this reason, I download and collect one- to three-minute excerpts of this type and have students answer detailed questions about the content after listening.

Another type of intensive listening practice involves using pronunciation features to enhance comprehension, for example, with minimal pair practice or by listening to short segments of an online academic lecture and marking pronunciation features onto a transcript. Finally, some intensive listening activities in my class rely on online dictionaries, which students often access using their smartphones. I have seen a need for students to be able to look up unknown words when they hear them repeatedly and decide that they are important. Therefore, I dictate a few simple sentences with one presumably unknown word embedded in each one. Students take the dictation and then use their cell phones to look up the unknown word and make sure the definition fits the sentence, developing their orthographical knowledge and strategies for using technology.

Here are some useful online sources for intensive listening input.

- Short-format documentaries from NOVA Science Now for cloze exercises: <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/sciencenow/archive/>—transcripts are posted online

- Challenging short responses to interview-style questions for in-class work: <http://bigthink.com/videos>—often a transcript can be found below the video box
- Short excerpts from lecture resources presented in the next section, as well as from interesting talks presented in the previous section
- On-screen minimal pair exercises: <http://www.manythings.org/pp/>

Note-Taking

Note-taking instruction is an important aspect of most IEP oral skills classes, because many IEP students go on to study in US universities. This level of listening falls between extensive and intensive, with fairly long texts to which students must pay close attention and record main points, supporting evidence, and definitions. Rost (2011) might define this type of listening practice as selective listening, because learners must recognize and record key points (e.g., definitions, assertions, and evidence).

Many academic listening and speaking textbooks include graded lectures with listening exercises, but Flowerdew and Miller (1997) argue that these should at least be supplemented with recordings of authentic lectures. MacDonald, Badger, and White (2000) add that live teacher talk and even TV documentaries resemble authentic university lectures more than graded ESL lectures do in some important respects. Many universities record and post webcasts of public talks, lectures, and even full courses. Online documentaries can also be an excellent choice to provide authentic materials for note-taking practice.

Because most of the students who pass my class continue directly to university study, we selected a scaffolded approach to authentic lectures rather than using graded materials. Students spend a week gaining schema and vocabulary before watching a recorded lecture from a US university. Then they watch the first few minutes of lecture as a group and discuss tips and strategies, and they watch the full lecture at home over the weekend, with the ability to pause and repeat as needed. They bring their notes to class for a constructed response test. I use four lectures over a nine-week term, with a new content theme every two weeks. It would also be possible to select a single theme and watch many lectures from one online course, either as homework or in class with pauses for strategy and language lessons. It is important to supplement these note-taking tests based on unlimited viewings with some practice in comprehension on the basis of limited repetitions (such as quizzes on the basis of two in-class viewings of a shorter

video). In my class I provide tips and examples of good notes, but I let students develop their own note-taking systems. At times, students work with their notes in pairs to provide an opportunity to compare note-taking strategies. One could also develop notes templates for selected lectures to emphasize certain note-taking strategies or formats.

A great many authentic academic lectures are posted online, both class sessions and public talks. I can highly recommend four sources:

- <http://academicearth.org/subjects/>—A collection of resources from many universities. Searchable by subject. Some are short, some are panel discussions, others are full courses. Captions depend on source.
- <http://webcast.berkeley.edu/>—This site was recently redesigned. A great many course lectures and public lectures are gathered here. Not captioned. Many are linked to YouTube, and these are downloadable.
- <http://video.mit.edu/>—Mostly special event and public talks, along with some brief documentary-style presentations. These public lectures include a fairly extensive written summary. Generally not captioned or downloadable. This site is also a portal to <http://ocw.mit.edu/courses/>, where courses are posted and some include audio or video lectures and are supported by attached lecture notes, slides, and so on (most captioned and not downloadable), and <http://techtv.mit.edu/>, with long video and short lectures and even some produced (documentary-style) videos on a wide variety of topics. Searchable and categorized, many of these videos are downloadable as mp4, m4v, or mov.
- <http://oyc.yale.edu/>—Full courses. Easy to stream audio or video using Flash or QuickTime, with options for resolution and closed captioning. Transcripts also posted.

Interaction

Interactive communication combines speaking and listening skills. Interactive tasks are often meaning focused, and they give learners an opportunity to put language to use to express their views and knowledge and to find out about the opinions and knowledge of others (see e.g., Rost, 2011, ch. 9.4; Skehan, 2001). Online materials can make a great springboard for various kinds of interactive activities, as students talk about what they have listened to and further develop themes from listening.

In my class, students watch an hour-long television documentary for each two-week thematic unit. After watching the documentary at

home, they talk in small groups about comprehension and general discussion questions, using notes they took while watching to support their answers. Then these groups select a theme related to the video and brainstorm questions for either interviews or academic discussions. For interviews, they create three main questions (personal experience, controversial opinion, and analysis/solution), with follow-up questions for each. In a later class meeting, members of each group conduct one-on-one interviews with all the other students in the class, also answering their partners' questions. This class period is full of engaged, interactive speaking and listening in English. With four groups, students get an opportunity to ask and take notes on the answers to the same questions three times, refining their asking and listening performance each time. They also consider and answer three sets of questions. For discussions, several students are assigned as discussion leaders to facilitate an academic exchange of opinions for 15-20 minutes (see http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIKc8LraS_E). Students often rate these experiences as their favorite part of the course.

The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is a great source for one-hour documentaries, which provide a great deal of input on topics of likely interest. I have used selected videos from the following sites.

- <http://video.pbs.org/program/frontline/>
- <http://video.pbs.org/program/nature/>
- <http://video.pbs.org/program/nova/>
- <http://video.pbs.org/program/american-experience/>
- <http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/> (a collector site with documentaries from many sources)

Language-Focused Speaking

Explicit, language-focused instruction in productive language can speed up language acquisition (see e.g., Nation & Newton, 2009, ch. 8) and help prevent fossilization of errors. In a language course based on freely available online materials, it is easy enough to develop appropriate speaking prompts on the basis of materials already used for listening. Language-focused speaking instruction (which includes a “focus on form” during task-based instruction; see e.g., Mennim, 2003; Skehan, 2001) can be both planned and incidental, including grammar and pronunciation lessons, corrections, task repetition, and building students' awareness of their own language use. For example, Lynch and Maclean (2000) found some improvements in both fluency and accuracy through task repetition alone and recommended an approach that included task repetition along with noticing activities and

guidance from an instructor. Huang (2008) had learners transcribe and reflect on their own performance in an oral communication task to help them connect their declarative knowledge about language rules to their speaking practice, and recommended that such an approach be carried out repeatedly through time and with an opportunity to repeat the performance after transcription and reflection.

For these reasons, one of the central components of Oral Skills 6 is an impromptu speaking activity (see Sheppard, 2012, for a more detailed description), in which students focus on accuracy in spoken production. The topic for this speaking activity is related to content themes developed via online materials, and the activity is completed at the end of every week, once students have built schema and vocabulary related to the topic. The students are divided into small groups with one small video camera for each group, and each student has the opportunity to answer an opinion question related to the documentary or lecture in one to two minutes (after one minute of planning time, in which the group can help each individual to brainstorm a reason and a piece of evidence for his or her answer). As a homework assignment, all students transcribe their speeches and correct their own transcripts. They then read their corrected transcripts on an online voice board and write a reflection on areas of oral accuracy they need to improve. These transcripts are further used for pronunciation or grammar exercises during class time.

The best online resources for use in language-focused speaking practice are those that have already been used for listening and interaction practice. Once learners have heard a given recording and understand it well, they can consider the formal elements of language used by the speakers within the context of the meaning they create. Thus, the questions and answers for impromptu speeches are inspired by the online listening materials used earlier in the course. Such listening materials could also be used to inspire dialogue tasks, which pairs could transcribe together (see e.g., Lynch, 2007), or students could remake an interview or scene found online, rehearsing, correcting, and recording their own versions, which could even be posted online. Internet resources can also be used for shadow speaking (learners read a transcript either in unison with the speaker, or in short phrases repeating after the speaker). In addition, online materials inspire incidental lessons in grammar and pronunciation, perhaps arising from a misunderstanding of the listening (e.g., “13” for “30”), or from a speaker’s choice of grammar (e.g., “ought to” vs. “should”). The key point in this strand is that students should get some regular feedback about their language accuracy and some regular opportunities to examine their own speaking and see what improvements they can make.

Vocabulary

A great deal of research emphasizes the importance of vocabulary to successful reading comprehension, but less has been published on the topic of vocabulary and listening comprehension. Those few studies indicate that vocabulary knowledge probably plays a lesser role in explaining differences in L2 listening ability than in reading, but its role is still important (Vandergrift, 2006, focuses on the contribution of general L2 proficiency, while Mecartty, 2000, considers vocabulary and grammar separately). On the basis of informal surveys and student reflections, I can say that knowing too few words is one of the reasons most frequently given by students for difficulties in listening comprehension. Vocabulary for explicit study can be selected from online listening materials either by teachers or students and then emphasized in ways limited only by the imagination of teacher and students. A key point here is that content themes (which use online materials on related topics over an extended period) allow for schema building and vocabulary recycling. The same words may be encountered in several listening texts, and they can also be applied in speaking activities related to these online materials.

For my Oral Skills 6 class, vocabulary lists are drawn from online academic lectures, and they are used across all strands of the course. The word list for a 50-minute lecture contains about 20 words, which tend to overlap at least 50% with the Academic Word List (Coxhead, 2000), but which are also chosen according to their importance for understanding the lecture. Students study the words and are initially quizzed on their ability to match them with English definitions. After practice in hearing and pronouncing the words, students work with partners to answer a series of discussion questions related to the vocabulary words. Words from the vocabulary lists are used in dictations and communicative tasks and appear in listening tasks. For an example vocabulary list, and to see how it could be applied to all strands and to see how the strands fit together, you can see sample materials at <https://sites.google.com/site/freeonlinelisteningspeaking/>.

Course Results

Informal course surveys have indicated that students enjoy this course and find many of the activities useful. Students most frequently choose leading discussion on the basis of lectures as the most enjoyable activity and impromptu speeches as the most useful activity. Watching recorded lectures (with tests) and doing interviews are also commonly cited as useful, while watching documentaries, pronunciation lessons, and interviews are also listed as enjoyable. Student comments include:

- “I improved my ability to understand a lecture or a conversation in English.”
- “I have improved how to make interviews and organize thoughts during Spring term.”
- “I improved the way of thinking, before I go to this class, I’m not so sure what I can speak when I have to, but for now, I have a lot of clue to speak whatever I want.”
- “Impromptu speeches are useful because we get to speak in it and find what are our weaknesses and try to fix them.”

In addition to students’ positive opinions of the course, their skills seem to be strong upon successful completion of this course. Once they complete our IEP and continue to the university, students take a placement test for credit-bearing ESL courses. Those who have passed OS6 often test out of further ESL courses in listening and speaking, although they may still need reading or writing classes.

Finally, instructors report that OS6 is a fairly easy course to teach. After an initial half term getting used to the structure and flow of the course, most report investing a very reasonable amount of time on grading and preparation work. This is because materials can be recycled from term to term, with any new materials that might be created during the term added to the store of available activities for future uses of that unit.

Conclusions

Basing an upper-level IEP listening and speaking course on on-line materials has brought a variety of benefits to our program. Students receive the materials enthusiastically and feel encouraged about their readiness for university study. We are able to replace topics and lectures individually if one becomes outdated, rather than needing to switch to a new textbook and course approach. The instructors enjoy listening to real and interesting videos. Although published textbooks for listening and speaking certainly have their own advantages, I encourage teams of instructors at other universities to try making greater use of the wealth of materials available online.

Author

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