Leading Article

Not just talking: Conversation and perceived progress in international students' informal language learning

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports the findings of my study of the out-of-class listening and speaking practice patterns of non-native speaking postgraduates at the University of Edinburgh. Following up earlier research at Edinburgh into international students' informal language experiences, carried out in the mid-1990s, this study was intended to update our picture of how international students may be using new electronic media, such as podcasts and MP3 players, as well as social interaction, to improve their English proficiency. Data was collected through a questionnaire and a structured interview. The findings suggest that students who tend to rely on one-way listening practice recognise less improvement in listening than those whose informal listening practice comes primarily from two-way interaction.

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Introduction

Research into the lives of international students has tended to address their adaptation to local norms (e.g. Al-Sharideh and Goe, 1998; Ramsey et al., 1999), the social and cultural dimensions of studying abroad (e.g. Freed, 1995; Myles and Cheng, 2003) and the role of informal social networks in enabling them to cope (e.g. Kudo and Simkin, 2003; Snow Andrade, 2006). Culturally oriented studies tend to represent the target language as a *problem* and *barrier*, rather than offering practical ways of resolving the difficulties that linguistic unfamiliarity may cause. The general lack of an orientation to learners' language learning opportunities beyond the walls of the EAP centre has been noted by a number of authors (e.g. Lynch, 2006; Field, 2007).

Context for the study

International students in English-speaking countries like Britain should be in a position to exploit opportunities for learning English in the real world where they live, study, shop, work and so on. This makes their situation fundamentally different from an EFL context, where language teachers aim to help language *learners* to become language *users* - in other words, to transfer what they have practised in an instructional setting to real-life situations. From the teacher's perspective, international students at Edinburgh and in similar ESL settings seem to be in an optimal position for informal learning. We can represent the potential sites for language learning in Figure 1.
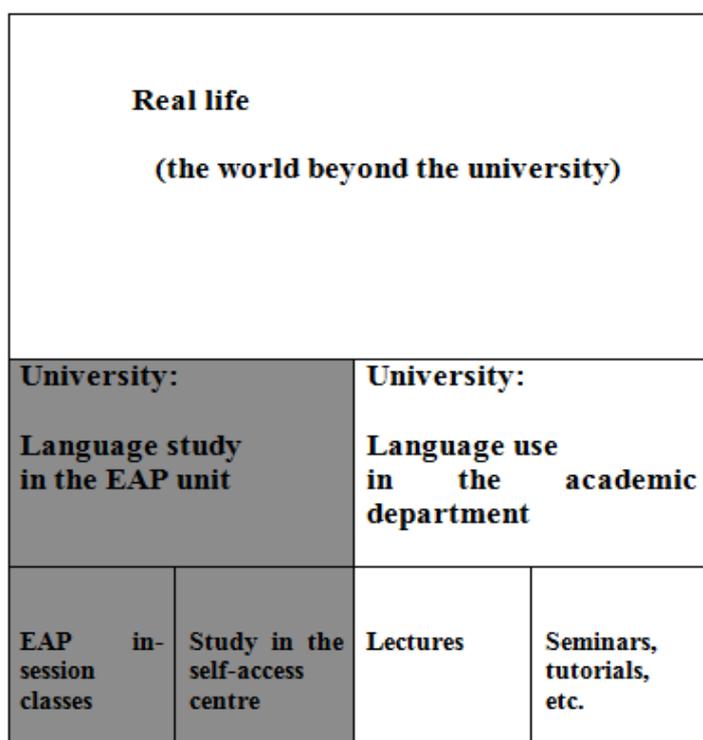
Figure 1: Language study and language use for international students

Yet many of the students I work with at Edinburgh – even those with high listening scores – tell me that what they need, in order to improve their listening proficiency, is an in-session listening course. In other words, they want to come back 'inside the box', to the security of the English classroom. I see it as one of our main tasks to raise students' awareness of practical ways of harnessing their daily experiences to extend their listening and speaking competence in English, that is, to reverse the conventional flow of instruction and to *derive learning from use*.

To help students make that shift, in the mid-1990s Kenneth Anderson and I developed a set of learner education materials called *PROFILE: Principles, Resources and Options for the Independent Learner of English* (Anderson and Lynch, 1996). Each unit contained three sections: *Principles* based on empirical research; *Resources* - materials and tasks drawn from the methodological literature and from our own teaching materials; and *Options,* based on our research into international students' informal English learning techniques. (For detailed discussion of the evolution of *PROFILE*, see Lynch, 2001).

By 2005, *PROFILE* required updating, in particular our guidance on listening. In addition to the inevitable ageing of any learning material, there had been major changes in listening technology over the decade since our original survey, including the spread of personal media players, computer technology and access to the Internet (Lynch, 2011). I wanted to examine the extent to which today's students might be making innovative use of such media and hardware, to engage in different types of listening and speaking practice from those of their predecessors in the 1990s. With this in mind, the ILSE (Informal Listening and Speaking Encounters) project was set up, to gather data from international students at Edinburgh on their out-of-class listening and speaking habits.

Method: Instruments and participants

Two instruments were used to gather information: a questionnaire and a structured interview. In the questionnaire international students were asked to estimate how much time they spent each day in degree classes and to say how their perceived improvement in listening compared with their expectations. They were also asked how much time they spent listening to or speaking English, which types of television and radio programmes they believed most helped them improve their listening, and whether they had developed any techniques for practising listening. The ILSE questionnaire was emailed to students some six months into their stay in Edinburgh and replies were received from 105 respondents.

The second instrument exploring students' experiences was a follow-up interview. A number of respondents had attended in-session listening classes, at the end of which they had retaken our matriculation Listening Test. Their pre- and post-course scores provided some objective measure of their improvement in listening over a limited period, which could be compared with the subjective perceptions elicited in the questionnaire. On the basis of their retest scores, I invited nine students for a follow-up interview – three each from low, average and high bands of improvement of TEAM Listening score. Eight agreed to be interviewed: three Low, two Average and three High.

Findings and Discussion

Progress reported

As far as *overall progress* is concerned, just over half the 105 respondents reported less improvement in listening than they had expected; and most of the others said they had made about as much as they had expected. Only 10 students (roughly 10 per cent) felt they had made more progress than they had thought they would.

Table 1: Self-evaluation of listening improvement (n = 105)

Listening groups	*I have made…*	*number*
A	*… less progress than I had expected*	54
B	*… as much progress as I had expected*	41
C	*… more progress than I had expected*	10

At first glance, a language teacher might find these figures rather depressing. But the fact that half the students felt they had made less improvement than they had anticipated could reflect unrealistic optimism before their arrival in Scotland, rather than disappointment with their progress since their arrival. The relatively small number who felt they had made more progress than expected is of greater concern; one might have hoped that students' eyes (and ears) would have been opened to the range of opportunities for effective informal listening practice in a target language setting.

Table 2: Informal listening inputs: type and time spent

Source	Number (n=105)	Mean
Listening		
- radio	59	40 min
- TV	63	33 min
- internet	48	31 min
- music/songs	76	42 min
Talking		
- other students	99	42 min
- flatmates	70	39 min
- landlord / host family	14	46 min
- partner	11	72 min

For *one-way listening,* music and songs were the most popular forms of practice (reported by 76 of the 105 students). The internet, perhaps surprisingly, was used by fewer than half the respondents. When it comes to *two-way listening* (Talking), all but six students reported some interaction in English with fellow students. Interestingly, the exceptions were all PhD students in humanities and social sciences, whose lives presumably revolve around individual library- or screen-based research, with less access to the sort of interaction with fellow project team members and laboratory staff that may be available to research students in science, engineering and biomedical fields.

There was a striking variation in individuals' daily exposure to spoken English (from less than 30 minutes to eight hours) – a point that also emerges from earlier international student surveys (e.g. Blue 1991; Peacock 2001; Myles and Cheng 2003). The student who reported the lowest total interaction time estimated that he spoke English for 25 minutes a day: 10 minutes to his classmates, 10 minutes to the students with whom he shared accommodation, and a further 5 minutes to staff at the local supermarket.

Techniques reported by ILSE informants

As mentioned earlier, the ILSE project was intended to update our knowledge of the informal language practice habits of our students and, in particular, to find out about their use of the media that have emerged since we first gathered PROFILE data. When compared with what their predecessors told us in 1996, the main changes to emerge are today's students' use of the new digital media - e.g. DVD films and podcasts for background listening - and a wider range of two-way conversational practice, such as through voluntary and paid work. None of the original PROFILE informants reported having part-time jobs – a sign, perhaps, of the economic times.

The eight students interviewed revealed striking differences among their lived experiences and their different encounters with spoken English. These varied in terms of their *type* of exposure to English, even when the amount of time was similar. One student doing PhD research in chemistry told me that he turned on Radio 2 as soon as he got into his lab in the morning and then left it on all day, working largely without any interaction with other students. Contrast this with the experience of a PhD student in psychology who talked of speaking English for six hours a day in the course of his research, which involved interviewing local patients with sleep disorders.

The second issue that came through was the strength of their beliefs about what had improved their listening comprehension, and the extent to which those beliefs may run counter to our views as listening teachers and researchers. Below is an example:

> *In China is a famous philosophy 'Speak loudly, speak clearly and speak quickly'. So just learn by heart all the papers. If you have good oral English, listening is not a problem. If I recite all the papers in <u>New Concept English</u>, so it's no problem listening.*
>
> (Student H)

My final interview question was: "If a friend from your home country were coming to study in Edinburgh next academic year, what advice would you give them on ways of improving their listening?" The responses suggest that some students are more positively oriented to one-way listening practice using radio, TV, Internet, CDs, than to two-way listening in interaction with others. Below is the advice offered by three of the eight interviewees:

Student B
Try to be involved, don't isolate yourself. When I arrived here I felt quite rejected because my English was not very clear as I would like it to be. But that's wrong. I changed my mind immediately. The best way to improve your English is to speak freely with people even if your English is not very good. People here are sensitive when they realise you are not a native. They help you. They don't correct you but they pay attention and they make an effort to understand you, and they answer your questions in the best way they can.

Student E
I think I would suggest they come here earlier and they connect to the BBC website. In our home country it's sort of passive learning, and you have to have a very high self-control, self-discipline, but once you come here the whole environment is English, so it's more active learning and more interaction with local people.

Student G
The more you listen, the better you understand. It's very good to listen to different accents here, like Australian English. If you come here, you can make friends with different nations, that's very important. I have Italian and French friends and their English is always simple and easy to understand... with European students their English is a lot better than me.

Of the eight students interviewed, it was Student H – who had expressed the greatest confidence in her overall learning 'philosophy' and listening proficiency – that made the least measured progress in listening. This might point to an association between a narrower view of listening and the amount of listening improvement.

If we look again at the daily spoken input figures, this time broken down into the self-reported listening improvement bands (Table 3), we see an overall difference of approximately 30 minutes between the average daily *ILSE* time of those in Group A, who assessed their progress as less than expected, and that of those in groups B and C.

Table 3: Progress evaluation and time spent daily on listening inputs

Listening groups	Number	*Listening* (mean)	*Talking* (mean)	Overall
A	54	86 min	65 min	151 min
B	41	91 min	94 min	185 min
C	10	64 min	127 min	191 min

However, the figures in the *Talking* column suggest something of greater potential importance: substantial differences in ILSE time between groups A and B, and between B and C. According to their self-reports, the learners in group B were spending approximately 30 minutes more per day speaking English than those in group A, and the learners in group C were, in turn, spending a further half-an-hour more a day on talking than group B. Virtually all the difference in overall *ILSE* time between groups B and C is accounted for by time spent *talking*. While the differences between the three Overall figures are not significant, the correlation between *Talking* and self-reported progress in listening among the three groups is significant, if modest (Pearson .292, p = .048). Clearly, this is an association between perceived progress in listening and more interaction, and not necessarily a causal relationship.

So this ILSE study provides some indication that concentrating on one-way listening may help students achieve less progress in the target language than will seeking opportunities for conversation. This is in line with the Comprehensible Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1995) and the well-established SLA argument – going back to Hatch (1978) and beyond – the key to linguistic progress is plentiful experience of *meaningful* conversation in the target language.

Implications

In the light of these students' experiences, how can we best help international students to become more effective learners from informal language use? If students are attending in-session EAP classes, one technique would be to model an effective approach for international students to adopt in interaction 'outside the box', by using recordings of non-native speakers participating successfully in conversations. Just as language teachers can gain insights from *analysing conversational recordings*, so students can benefit from seeing examples of successful (and unsuccessful) negotiation of meaning and form, of the sort they are likely to engage in informally. In this way we may be able to raise students' awareness of – and skill in – efficient interactive listening behaviour.

Such modelling should perhaps highlight conversations in which both partners are international students, to reflect the fact that - even in ESL settings – many students, on the evidence of this ILSE project and that of Blue (1991), have little social contact with native English speakers. For them, conversation with native speakers may be an unrealistic expectation. But teachers can use such learner/learner recordings to illustrate the ins and outs of conversation in English as a shared second language, focusing on how comprehension problems are signalled, negotiated and resolved – as well as on the source of the communicative problem.

A second implication of this study is the need to encourage students to be on the lookout, in their everyday experience of spoken English, for *potential learning points*, to help them

achieve a pay-off for the time they invest in such conversation. One of my past Chinese students reported talking to a male German flatmate about a book she was reading and realizing that he was finding it hard to understand her when she said the book was *"a bottle of"* (at least, this is how I heard what she said). When I then asked her *"a bottle of what?"*, she laughed and said *"That's what my flatmate asked me when I said it to him. It's not a book that's a bottle of something, it's just a bottle of"*. Still unable to understand what the student meant, I asked her to spell out *"a bottle of"*. She did, slowly and reluctantly: *"A-B-O-U-T L-O-V-E"*.

This illustrates the potential of everyday communication as a platform for learners to notice and analyse what others find problematic in their spoken English – in this case, recognizing the need to distinguish more clearly between /au/, /o/ and /ʌ/ - which I believe can help learners adopt an analytical stance towards their conversational experiences. If we can help students, in a very practical way, to gather and reflect on their own 'data' from encounters in conversation, on how people negotiate meaning and repair communication when necessary, they will stand a better chance of deriving learning from use and, in particular, of realizing that conversation can be a means to a linguistic end as well as a interactional experience.

A third implication is the potential value of enabling current international students to tap into the lived experiences of previous students, as we attempted to do in the *PROFILE* project – though the materials were available in printed form, as a book which students could choose to buy. Following the *ILSE* project, these materials have been updated and expanded in digital form, now called *Effective English Learning* (University of Edinburgh, 2013). Putting the materials on the web should mean that tomorrow's students will have access to the experience and *learning narratives of previous students*, in a form that does not have to be mediated by a language teacher.

Summary

I have argued that we should look for ways of persuading international students that two-way listening, in the form of conversation, is more than "just talking" and that it can be harnessed to improve their listening as well as their speaking. It is essential to give them an insight, particularly in the early stages of their studies, into the range of listening and speaking opportunities available to them beyond the immediate academic context - outside the 'EAP box' - which they may otherwise assume is the best site for improving their English.

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