

# Unifying Listening with a Class Website

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## **Abstract**

The Internet opened doors to language learners who want to improve their ability through self-study, as well as being a valuable tool for teachers in the classroom. This paper argues that the creation of a “class website” with listening materials for class activities, and links to website providing authentic listening practice, can be a powerful motivating force for students to improve their listening ability through explicit instruction and independent self-study. Students can learn listening strategies through class material with the guidance of a teacher and then use the skills learned to improve their listening via independent study. A class website can thus act as a unifying base for a class, as well as a diversified resource, or hub, for students studying individually.

## **What Makes a Suitable Class Website?**

A class website can take many forms, and use different platforms such as Moodle or Wordpress, but the site referred to in this paper, [www.stepenglish.org](http://www.stepenglish.org), has several features which make it suitable for students to improve their listening both inside and outside of the classroom. It uses Wordpress.com, a blogging platform, which is not specifically designed for but suitable for a class website. Wordpress is a convenient platform to use, is easy to set up and smoothly supports almost all sound and video formats, such as YouTube as well as video embedding. Another advantage

Wordpress has as a platform is that there are a large number of well-designed templates, and so the teacher has a good deal of flexibility concerning the appearance and layout of a class site. A personal preference is for a three-column template, with one column used to present the listening material/videos/transcripts used in lessons, freeing the other two columns for links which students can use for extensive, independent listening practice.

### **Listening: Different Approaches**

Trying to understand speech in a foreign language is difficult, and perhaps more importantly, can be extremely frustrating with knock-on effects for students' motivation. There is a good deal of uncertainty about how listening in a second language should be taught, or indeed whether it really can be taught to a great degree at all. This is reflected in the literature, which contains claims and counter-claims as to how language learners listen and try to understand a foreign language, and which approaches and techniques teachers can use to help improve their students' listening ability.

A number of distinctions can be made between kinds of listening approaches at a pedagogical level. However, two important themes that refer to students' needs were identified by Brown (2009), and both of these share a focus on student needs and motivation. The first theme is that of supporting students when they are practicing listening by choosing material that they have some prior knowledge of in order to improve listening. It can be difficult to know what prior knowledge students do have, but the pre-teaching vocabulary and pre-discussion of the topics involved in any listening can help activate previously-held knowledge in students, or generate the sharing of knowledge between students within a class. Students can then capitalize on this knowledge, which in turn can help them understand any listening

material better. The second theme is that of student motivation, which has been identified as an important element in the success of a language learner by (Gardner: 2001) among others. Listening in a foreign language is a difficult skill to improve, and therefore it is important to try to keep student motivation high. This can be done in a number of ways, for example, using interesting material, choosing listening material that is challenging but not too difficult, using video, explicitly teaching micro skills and, most importantly, showing students that their listening is progressing.

## Top Down and Bottom Up

These are two different way of “explaining the listening process” Swift (2007). The first, top-down, refers to the prior knowledge we possess when we listen and how we use this to aid understanding before we go down to the individual sounds of syllables and words. It is in this process that choosing material which students have some prior knowledge of becomes important. Swift (2007) provides an excellent example of how prior knowledge can be important:

*McKenzy brought me another present today. It was too late to save it so I buried it in the garden.*

A good deal of non-native speakers might recognize that “McKenzy” is a name and assume that it is the name of a person, perhaps the speaker’s friend. Unless you have the prior knowledge that McKenzie is the name of a cat, then it could be very difficult to understand the meaning of this sentence. Why, for example, would you bury your friend’s present in the garden? This example shows very clearly the importance of prior knowledge in listening and a top down approach.

Bottom up listening is the opposite approach, that is, starting from individual sounds, moving up through words, phrases, sentences and texts. This approach involves the listener in a detailed analysis and decoding of spoken language. It is in this approach to listening that micro skills can be identified and strategies taught by teachers. Teaching listening strategies to improve bottom up processing is useful way for teachers to facilitate improvement in listening because it teaches that human beings analyze spoken utterances when listening because, as Barker (2012) points out, people do not listen with their ears but rather with their brains. Therefore, a bottom-up approach to listening combined with explicit teaching of micro skills helps students to analyze with their brains while listening.

### **Extensive Listening and Strategies**

Another distinction made concerning listening is that of extensive listening versus strategies, and there is some debate as to which is more effective for language learners. Extensive listening involves a large amount of self-study listening without specific comprehension questions and no specific goals beyond an approximate understand of the spoken material. It is up to the individual to choose the listening material and decide how much they want to understand—the gist or detailed understanding. A language learner will often choose material that is of personal interest. There is lack of research into extensive listening, but a few studies have been carried out, such as Renandya and Farrel (2011), who argue for extensive listening in the “same vein as extensive reading”, and maintain that there is a lack of evidence that a teacher-oriented, strategy-based approach is defective in increasing listening proficiency. A class website, such as [www.stepenglish.org](http://www.stepenglish.org) , can act as a valuable source of materials for extensive listening.

Teaching listening using strategies involves the breaking down of listening into

micro skills, and the teaching of them in isolation from each other, or in small combinations. The different micro skills were best summarized by Richards (1983), who identified 33 different skills, such as the ability to recognize word boundaries, and the ability to recognize reduced forms of words. Being aware of these micro skills, and using them when listening, can be a useful aid to understanding. In the classroom, listening comprehension questions often involve the identification and practice of these micro skills.

The use of a class website, however, renders the debate as to which approach is better useless because both can be used in the same space, i.e. the class website. In-class videos can be used and shown to the class as a whole, and students can use the site for their own extensive listening practice. Therefore, there is a major advantage of thinking of a class website as a hub for unified class study and individual self-study.

## **Bringing It Altogether**

The previously mentioned approaches to listening all have their advantages and pitfalls. However, using a class website is a means of exposing students to all of the different approaches and using them in tandem to improve listening. The benefits of using a website, such as [stepenglish.org](http://stepenglish.org), as a listening resource to do this are summarized below:

### **1) Authentic Materials**

Students can quickly and conveniently gain access to a large amount of authentic listening materials. Authentic material is anything that is not prepared specifically for the purpose of language teaching (Nunan, 2004), or alternatively, non-pedagogical material. The speaker(s) do not have to be native speakers, but more

often than not they will be. The Internet is obviously a very good source for such authentic material, and by carefully choosing websites which suit students interests and needs, a class website can act as a very good resource for extensive listening. One advantage of using such material is it provides students with exposure to real language that is beneficial in the long run. The bridge between the classroom and the real world becomes shorter and easier to cross, and hence students are better prepared for the real world outside the classroom. Concurrently, students can gain a better cultural understanding of English-speaking countries because they are exposed to cultural information through authentic materials. The other major benefit of authentic materials is motivational; they are simply more interesting than pedagogical materials more often than not. This fact, coupled with the satisfaction of overcoming the challenge of understanding real English are positive motivational factors for students. The motivational factors are best summed up by Wardman (2009), who observes that authentic materials can empower students.

## **2) Convenient Access**

A website such as [stepenglish.org](http://stepenglish.org) can be accessed on a computer, and it is easy to create an icon on the home screen of a smartphone to allow easy and convenient access. Blogging sites, such as Wordpress, have mobile applications which are specifically designed for easy access and are easy to use.

## **3) Teacher Contact**

As authentic listening material is often challenging, it is important for teachers to make themselves available for any queries students might have. Students can ask questions during a class or e-mail them.

## **4) Student Choice**

The site [www.stepenglish.org](http://www.stepenglish.org) has a large number of links which students can

investigate and practice their listening. The types of sites range from news, to nature, sport and music. At the time of writing, the site contained around 40 links to different sites, which represents a wide range of different listening material students can access. This large choice means a wide variety of material is available for students.

## **5) Updates**

Most of the links on the website are updated regularly. This is especially true of new sites, such as Reuters, which are updated almost constantly. This means that students can listen to contemporary material that might have relevance to their current life.

## **6) Follow-Up Activities**

Listening does not have to be an end; it can also be a means for students to improve other skills. It is perfectly possible for teachers to use listening material as a base for improving students' speaking skills, in for example a discussion situation.

## **Conclusion**

A class website is without a doubt a useful resource for both teachers wishing to teach listening strategies and for students to pursue independent study. It can act as a unifying force that brings together the different types of listening approaches mentioned in this study. The ease in which a teacher can set up and run one means that it should be an essential part of any college class in Japan that contains listening content.

## References

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