

# THE USE OF PERSONAL LISTENING LOG IN A LANGUAGE CLASSROOM – A LOOK AT STUDENTS' FEEDBACK

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## ABSTRACT

*In its effort to address the declining language proficiency among the undergraduates, the Academy of Language Studies at UiTM has decided to implement the Personal Listening Log – a variant of journal writing in which students record their responses to listening exercises. In the Personal Listening Log, which is done outside the formal language class, students need to respond, predict and/or reflect on the given listening texts. The use of the Personal Listening Log is believed to increase students' knowledge, vocabulary and also their listening skills. The data is obtained via a survey questionnaire, which is administered to a group of 36 first-year students, as well as interviews with ten students. The findings are discussed in terms of a) the problems that students face in carrying out the activity; and b) the students' responses to the activity. Based on students' feedback that was obtained, the paper concludes with some recommendations for language instructors who are contemplating on using the Personal Listening Log to enhance students' interest in listening to materials in English as well as listening proficiency.*

**Keywords:** personal listening log; listening exercises; listening comprehension

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*"Listening looks easy, but it's not simple."*

— Cuban Proverb

Listening, one of the fundamental language skills which has long been viewed as a passive activity, has now been regarded as a complex and active activity (Vandergrift, 1999; Chen, 2005; Palacios, 2015). Studies (see for example Bellota, 2012) have shown that listening should be taught in a language classroom as it is essential for good communication and has tremendous effect on other language skills. Listening in general involves three stages namely hearing the words, understanding the meaning of those words in relation to the context and to indicate to the speaker that the message is understood by providing the appropriate responses (Mendelsohn, 1994; Bellota, 2012). O'Malley, Chamot, and Kupper (1989) and Palacios (2015) claimed that listening is a complex process as many motor processes are involved right

from the moment the listener perceives the sound to the establishment of the meaning of what is heard. Based on these postulations, listening could be summarized as an active and complex activity which requires the listener to actively attend to the words that is heard, utilize his/her background knowledge (such as linguistic as well as world knowledge) to understand the message and response accordingly.

In the next section, a brief discussion on the teaching of listening is presented.

## **2. THE TEACHING OF LISTENING**

Listening, which is a vital component for effective communication (O'Shea et al. in McNaughton et al., 2007), could be regarded as the first language skill that a child acquires. It is a known fact that children begin learning their mother tongue by listening and then slowly attaching meaning to the words that they hear (Levine & Munsch, 2010). Listening may come naturally to children so much so that they do not seem to be paying any conscious attention to this skill. However, as they grow and learn a second or foreign language in their teenage or adult life, they soon realize that they have to put in much more effort in order to comprehend what is heard. Listening in second language learning requires more conscious effort from the learner. For example, learners need to “develop the necessary learner knowledge and control of internal cognitive and affective processes, as well as the external social demands that influence comprehension success” (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). It is therefore important for a second or foreign language instructor to place equal emphasis on listening in a second or foreign language classroom.

Over the years, the pedagogy used in the teaching of listening has evolved tremendously. In the 1970s, the focus of the teaching of listening was on word identification, individual sounds, and sound combinations (Hinkel, 2006). This approach came to be known as the bottom-up processing approach. In bottom-up processing, listeners are thought to break down the sound stream into meaningful units and then slowly construct meaning from the smallest to the biggest unit – sounds, words, clauses, sentences (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Richards, 2008). What this means is listeners mainly use their linguistic knowledge to process what is heard. The following decade saw a shift in the emphasis to one that placed importance on knowledge-based schemata. The proponents of this approach, which is also known as top-down processing, were of the opinions that the listener needs to activate his or her background knowledge to infer the meaning of what is heard (Richards, 2008; Uso-Juan & Martinez-Flor, 2006). Among the background knowledge that may be activated are world knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, and situational knowledge (Vandergrift & Goh, 2012; Richards, 2008). While the debate of whether bottom-up or top-down linguistics processing is more superior continues, a third opinion emerged. This third group (see for example, Vandergrift & Goh, 2012 and Hinkel, 2006), claimed that both approaches have failed to produce impressive results. This is because students who are exposed to either approach will fail to master the other. As such, it is important for language instructors to strike a balance between both approaches.

In an attempt to incorporate both approaches, the Personal Listening Log (see 3.3 for more information regarding this activity) was used in this study. In the Personal Listening Log, students have to first use top-down processing. This means that they have to activate their background knowledge in order to understand and make sense of what is heard. In completing

the given task, students are required to listen and write down a few new/difficult words as well as the sentences that contain those new/difficult words. In this, they are indirectly using the bottom-up processing approach.

The use of the Personal Listening Log also means that students have to practice active listening, a skill that is possessed by a competent listener. Active listening requires the listener to focus his or her concentration and attention to what is being heard (Bellota, 2012). As the listener is continuously attending and responding to the speaker, miscommunications can often be averted.

Another reason for using the Personal Listening Log is that the activity provides an opportunity for the students to familiarize themselves with the targeted language as spoken by the native speaker. Students could also be exposed to various accents of the language. What this means is students would have a chance to listen to samples of the language that could be found in real-life communication and thus prepare them for the outside world (Ur, 2012).

In this study, an attempt to look at students' feedback on the use of the Personal Listening Log is made. Two areas of interest are a) the problems that students face in carrying out the activity; and b) the students' responses to the activity.

In the next section, a brief description on the use of the Personal Listening Log is presented.

### **3. THE USE OF PERSONAL LISTENING LOG IN CLASS**

#### ***3.1 The Samples***

A total of 36 students were involved in this study. They were students of Diploma in Civil Engineering and were in their first semester of their diploma program. In terms of gender, this group was equally divided. There were 18 boys and 18 girls. They were in the range of 18 – 20 years old and had completed their SPM, a public examination for secondary school students before they leave school to seek work or to continue with tertiary education. In terms of their English language proficiency, these students were considered to be of similar ability as they all managed to secure a credit in their SPM English language paper. However, in class, it was discovered that six students were rather weak in their command of the English language.

#### ***3.2 ELC120 - Integrated Language Skills: Listening***

In order to improve the students' command of English language, the Academy of Language Studies at UiTM revamped the syllabi of the English language courses that are offered to students. Among the new courses that are being offered is ELC120 - Integrated Language Skills: Listening.

ELC120 is a course that is offered to diploma students who are in their first semester. It is a compulsory English language course that they must enroll and secure at least a pass. As suggested in the name of the course, emphasis is given to improve students' listening skills.

### 3.3 Personal Listening Log

In ELC120, apart from the formal assessments of listening quizzes and listening tests, students were required to keep a Personal Listening Log. In this activity, students have to listen to pre-determined stories, reflect and keep a record of their responses to the stories. For the purpose of this study, in each of the Personal Listening Log exercise that was assigned, students were given a total of two weeks to listen to a prescribed text and then complete a task. The task comprised four parts as described in Table 1.

Table 1: The Personal Listening Log task

Section	Task
Part 1	Students are to : a. list the characters in the story b. briefly tell what the story is about
Part 2	Students are to : a. name the character that they like most b. provide reason(s)
Part 3	Students are to : a. write THREE new words/phrases that are new to them b. identify the character that said those words/phrases c. write the original sentence that contains each word/phrase d. write the meaning of each word/phrase based on the context, or by looking it up in the dictionary. e. construct a sentence using each word/phrase
Part 4	Students are to write a reflection of 100 – 150 words

Throughout the semester, students had to complete five Personal Listening Log exercises. In order to expose students to various accents, the five audio/video recordings used included British, American and local (Singaporean & Malaysian) accents. The listening materials used were made up of two audio recordings and three video clips. In the first exercise, a video clip with low resolution was used. This was done on purpose as the instructor did not want the students to rely on the visual information. Through the Personal Listening Log, it is hoped that students will be able to enhance their knowledge and lexical density, and most importantly improve their listening skills. In the next four exercises, audio and video recordings were alternately used. The inclusion of video recordings in the third and fifth exercises was to break the monotony.

### 3.4 Limitations of the Study

As with other studies, this study has its limitations. Firstly, the samples involved only 36 students. As such, the findings obtained might not be reflective enough of the whole population. Apart from that, due to the limited number of samples, there is no means to set up a control group. Therefore, it is not possible to determine whether the claims made by the samples during the interview were indeed true. The information obtained from the interview, however, served as a validation to the information obtained from the first part of the questionnaire.

#### 4. THE FEEDBACK FROM THE SAMPLES

Feedback was obtained from the students via questionnaire. The questionnaire was designed to elicit students' feedback on the use of the Personal Listening Log in the course. The two areas of interest were a) the problems that students faced in carrying out the activity, and b) the students' responses to the activity.

The questionnaire comprised two major parts. In the first part, students had to list the problems that they faced while completing the given tasks. The second part consisted of 17 five-point Likert scale items.

##### *4.1 The Problems that Students Faced in the Personal Listening Log*

In the questionnaire, students were asked to list the problems that they faced while completing the task given to them. Students could list as many problems as they want. Their answers were compared and categorized. Table 2 shows the problems that they faced.

Table 2: The problems faced in completing the Personal Listening Log

Problems faced	No of complaints
(1) Difficulty in understanding the accent	14
(2) Unable to spell the difficult words	12
(3) Slow internet connection	8
(4) Low video quality	4
(5) Unable to understand the story	4
(6) Spending too much time	3

As shown in Table 2, the problems faced by the students can be categorized into two – language proficiency related and set-up related. Problems (1), (2), (5) and (6) that students faced were related to their language proficiency, while problems (3) and (4) were set-up related.

A total of 14 students complained that they had difficulty in understanding the British and American accents. We can infer that these students had not had enough exposure to foreign accents. This is rather surprising as British and American films/shows are common in our country. The interview with the students revealed that when they watch British and American films/shows, they will normally rely on the Malay subtitles and do not listen to the conversations. That is why they are unfamiliar with the accents.

12 students claimed that they found it difficult to find the correct spelling of the difficult/unfamiliar words. A probable reason for this is because they lack knowledge on the sounds of consonant clusters. This shows that the students had little or no knowledge on the systematic organization of sounds in English language.

Problems (5) and (6) are somehow related to problems (1) and (2). This is especially true for the weaker students, and the interviews with the weaker students confirmed this postulation.

Problem (3) is a common complaint in the campus and students had been reminded to never leave the tasks to the last minute lest they were unable to complete the tasks on time. As for problem (4), the interviews revealed that it was in reference to only the first video clip which had low visual resolution.

#### 4.2 The Students' Responses to the Personal Listening Log

Altogether, students were given 17 items that they had to respond to by indicating whether they 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'no comment/neutral', 'disagree', or 'strongly disagree'. For easy discussion, the 'strongly agree' and 'agree' categories are combined into a single 'agree' category, and the 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree' categories are combined into a single 'disagree' category. It should be noted that although there were 17 items, only 14 items that are relevant to the scope of this paper will be presented.

Table 3 shows the students' responses to the first nine items. These questions were related to the general aspects of the Personal Listening Log.

Table 3: Opinions regarding the Personal Listening Log (Items 1 – 9)

Items	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
1. Personal Listening Log is easy.	31.00	58.00	11.00
2. I like to do Personal Listening Log.	72.00	22.00	6.00
3. I will continue doing Personal Listening Log in future.	64.00	30.00	6.00
4. Doing five (5) Personal Listening Log activities in a semester is sufficient.	69.00	22.00	9.00
5. We should have a Personal Listening Log activity every week.	45.00	32.00	23.00
6. I need to spend a lot of time to complete a Personal Listening Log activity.	58.00	25.00	17.00
7. Personal Listening Log is a waste of time.	14.00	19.00	67.00
8. The Personal Listening Log template is helpful.	95.00	2.00	3.00
9. I prefer to write my responses without using the Personal Listening Log template.	14.00	39.00	47.00

As can be seen, 58.00% of the students thought that the Personal Listening Log was neither easy nor difficult. This could mean that the audio/video recordings that were used were of moderate difficulty and suitable. 72.00% of the students liked the activity, and 64.00% of the students claimed that they would continue to do the Personal Listening Log in future. This could be an indication that the Personal Listening Log had managed to create some interest in some of the students to continue listening to materials produced in the English language, and thus the use of the Personal Listening Log had managed to achieve its objective.

Regarding the frequency of having the Personal Listening Log, only a handful thought that it should be held every week. A reason for this was reflected in item 6, in which slightly more than half of the students (58.00%) claimed that they needed to spend a lot of time on the Personal Listening Log. In the interview session, all the ten students claimed that they had to spend about two hours to complete a Personal Listening Log task. However, most students (67.00%) were of the opinion that the Personal Listening Log activity was not a waste of time.

A possible reason for this is reflected in the responses obtained for items 10, 11 and 12 (see Table 4 below).

Items 8 and 9 were given in order to gauge the usefulness of giving a template that students could use in completing the task. Both items concurred that students needed some kind of guidance in the task and they agreed that the template was useful. The template used was one that was designed based on the Personal Listening Log Task shown in Table 1.

Table 4 shows the students' responses to the next three items. These questions were related to the skills that were practiced via the Personal Listening Log.

Table 4: Skills practiced in the Personal Listening Log (Items 10 – 12)

Items	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
10. Personal Listening Log can improve my listening skill	98.00	0.00	2.00
11. Personal Listening Log can improve my writing skill	97.00	0.00	3.00
12. Personal Listening Log can improve my vocabulary	97.00	0.00	3.00

Almost all the students agreed that the Personal Listening Log could help improve their listening and writing skills. They also agreed that they could improve their vocabulary. In the interview conducted, students claimed that in general, they had learnt at least five new words in each of the Personal Listening Log task. They also liked the idea of having recordings with different accents even though they sometimes had difficulties in comprehending what is said due to the unfamiliar accent.

An inference that could be made from the results of these three items (items 10, 11 and 12) and also items 6 and 7 (in Table 3) is that even though the Personal Listening Log was regarded as a time consuming activity, the students do not mind doing it as it benefitted them in many ways. Thus, it can be concluded that the Personal Listening Log was worth all the effort as in the end students were able to improve their language skills.

Table 5 shows the students' responses to the next two items. These questions were related to the materials that were used in the Personal Listening Log.

Table 5: Materials for the Personal Listening Log (Items 13 – 14)

Items	Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
13. I should be allowed to choose the materials for Personal Listening Log	25.00	44.00	31.00
14. The lecturer should choose the materials for Personal Listening Log	66.00	25.00	9.00

From the responses to items 13 and 14, only a few students (25.00% and 9.00% respectively) were of the opinion that they should be allowed to choose the materials for the Personal Listening Log. This could suggest that only a handful of the students were independent learners. The rest of them preferred to have the guidance of the instructor.

During the interview with the ten students, two matters of interest were noted. The first was eight students claimed that they had difficulty in understanding as well as follow the development of some of the stories. This was because they could not understand the context of the story or why the characters behave in a particular way. A probable reason for this is they lack the cultural knowledge that was required. This is an example of failing to activate the necessary top-down processing. The second issue that was noted is related to bottom-up processing. All ten students brought up the issue of having difficulty in determining/guessing the spelling of most of the words that are new to them. This could suggest that they lack necessary linguistic knowledge. Without the required linguistic knowledge, the students had problems in breaking down the sound stream and reconstructing the meaningful units. These two issues indicate the importance of top-down and bottom-up processing in listening.

## **5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study was carried out to obtain feedback from students regarding a) the problems that students faced in carrying out the activity, and b) the students' responses to the activity.

The feedback obtained indicates that the Personal Listening Log is a useful activity to be used in class. Students claimed that they had benefitted from the activity. They were able to learn new words besides practicing their listening and writing skills. This concurs with the postulations that a) having the necessary listening skills is important as it helps to develop competencies in other areas of language acquisition including vocabulary (Barker in Stepanovienė, 2012) and b) listening also helps in the development of language proficiency especially in the written and spoken form (Cayer et al in Stepanovienė, 2012).

Although the Personal Listening Log could be time consuming, the students felt that it was worth the effort. The time spent to listen attentively to the recordings had in a way provided them a chance to concentrate on what is being heard. This means that the Personal Listening Log can be used to encourage active listening.

The feedback also provided some information on a few issues that instructors who want to implement the Personal Listening Log in their class should take note of. Firstly, as the activity may be time consuming, the number of recordings/clips to be used should be a major consideration. The instructor should also consider how s/he wants to make the recordings/clips available to the students. If the recordings/clips are to be embedded into a LMS, then the internet bandwidth is an important factor. Secondly, the instructor would need to decide on the accent that students should be exposed to. Local accent would definitely be easier to understand but could be less challenging. Foreign accents especially British and American accents could benefit students as they are exposed to accents of native speakers. According to Rost (as cited in Alijani, 2014) listening exercises could be a good way to provide students a chance to be exposed to the authentic use of the language as used by a native speaker. Finally, the instructor must also equip the students with the relevant linguistic competence as well as background knowledge so that students would be able to utilize the relevant top-down and bottom-up processing to understand the stories better.

To conclude, the Personal Listening Log, an activity which is rather common in the teaching of music, is a good tool to use in a language classroom. It could be used to enhance students' knowledge and lexical density, encourage writing, and most importantly improve their listening.



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