



Adopting CALL to Promote Listening Skills for EFL Learners in Vietnamese Universities

Lan Luu Thi Phuong

University of Auckland (New Zealand)
lluu003@aucklanduni.ac.nz

Abstract

Listening skills are an important area in foreign language learning. The literature concerning pedagogy associated with the teaching of such skills is reasonably comprehensive and of increasing interest. However, research with respect to the use of recent digital technologies to enhance the teaching and learning of listening skills is still limited. This study aimed to discover the extent to which Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) activities influence academic listening skills of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, as well as teachers' attitudes towards computer use and their computer skills in language teaching in Vietnamese tertiary institutions. A quasi-experimental design was adopted.

The study was conducted in two phases, the Baseline and Intervention, the latter sustained over three months. The treatment sample of this study consisted of four teachers of listening and their students (in total approximately 100). The teachers were invited to a training workshop on computer skills, and received online resources for their teaching supplements. The intervention classes were taught with these supplementary online resources while the comparison classes (the other four classes) were supplemented with extra listening books selected by their teachers.

The results of the study showed that there was a difference between the listening scores of the students in the intervention classes compared those of the comparison students. The teachers showed changes in their attitudes towards computer use, and gained better skills in selecting effective sources from the Internet for listening instruction. The study suggests that computer use in listening instruction should be given much more consideration so as to improve the listening skill of EFL learners, and to motivate both teachers and learners. Implications of the findings for pedagogy, and research methodology are discussed.

Introduction

Listening skills play an important role in foreign language learning and teaching. Although the literature on pedagogy associated with teaching listening skills is increasingly comprehensive, research on the use of computers to enhance the teaching of listening skills is still limited.

The paper aimed to employ a computer-based program for teaching academic listening skills supporting the listening syllabus in an EFL department, and to probe its effects on EFL teachers and learners in Vietnamese universities. The design of the project can be considered quasi experimental. In this paper, EFL teachers' attitudes towards technology use in teaching language skills as well as their computer skills are investigated prior to the intervention, and their changes after the program are discussed. In addition, their students' changes in listening performance are also discussed.



CALL and Listening Skills

Computer-based materials include computer courses, learning programs, computer games, software for teaching and learning etc, while Web-based materials mean distance courses, and online teaching and learning materials (Serdiukov, 2001). CALL software, online discussion boards, and online conference tools such as text chat, whiteboard, audio and video, offer opportunities for comprehensible input and output, and meaning negotiation (Chapelle, 1999). Through many websites, a great amount of authentic material, which is readily applicable, up-to-date, and free, can be used for language skills. For example, teachers and students can access online authentic listening material from radio or TV programs for listening teaching and practice (Mosquera, 2001). Students can even use mobile phones to browse wireless application protocol (WAP) for listening, which creates more opportunities for honing their language skills and encourages them to actively participate in learning. Podcasts (the delivery of on-demand audio and video files through the Web) can also be used to facilitate listening instruction which, research shows, has resulted in teachers' and learners' positive attitudes towards computer-based multimedia (O'Bryan & Hegelheimer, 2007). In general, CALL-based listening instruction enhanced students' listening ability (Bingham & Larson, 2006), and had positive effect on their attitudes towards computer use (Puakpong, 2008).

Listening Skills and CALL Materials Selection

Along with the increasing use of computers in language teaching, English learning websites are expanding dramatically. As this trend has made it difficult for users to choose the right ones, "all teachers need to know how to use the Web as a resource for current authentic language materials in written, audio, and visual formats" (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004, p. 305). It has been, therefore, increasingly important to evaluate those materials systematically before use (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004; Fotos & Browne, 2004).

According to Yang & Chan (2008), many of the existing studies of website evaluation criteria are not specific enough; lack emphasis on evaluating the four skills transmission; most do not provide a complete set of criteria for one or all language learning aspects; most are entirely based on theory without including needs of teachers and learners, and most are not validated by empirical research. After screening and evaluating materials, language teachers should, however, adapt or modify the materials to suit their own teaching situations (Chapelle & Hegelheimer, 2004).

In this project, a computer-based program was employed for teaching listening skills supporting the listening syllabus at the department, and investigated its effects on listening skills development as well as on the attitudes of EFL teachers towards computer-based language instruction in Vietnamese universities.

Methodology

The methodology applied in this study was mixed-method, that is both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Creswell (2009) called this strategy concurrent triangulation as both methods occurred in one phase of the research period. In this approach, data are merged or results of two databases are integrated or compared. This strategy would make it possible for the strengths of one method to compensate for the other's weaknesses and vice versa, thus providing broader understanding of the research problems. This would result in "well-validated and substantial findings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 213) for the study, and save time as both data are collected simultaneously.

In quantitative method, answers by teachers in the pre-intervention questionnaires about the extent and nature of teacher use of computers in language teaching, their students' listening scores, and answers by teachers in the post-intervention questionnaires were analyzed. The open questions in the pre-intervention questionnaires, post-intervention questionnaires, and the interviews were analyzed using qualitative method. The combination of the two methods helped the researcher answer the research questions.

The participants consisted of four teachers of listening and their students (in total approximately 100). Those teachers were selected based on the questionnaires showing that they had either negative or neutral attitudes to CALL and on their reported level of computer skills. They were invited to a training workshop on computer skills, and received online resources as their teaching supplements. The intervention classes were taught with these supplementary online resources while the comparison classes (the other four classes) were supplemented with extra listening books selected by their teachers. Through the training workshop at the beginning and fortnightly coachings, teachers learned how to make the best use of computers in their listening instruction. The program was implemented for the whole semester, which lasted twelve weeks, with the intervention group.

Results and Discussion

Effects of the intervention on EFL teachers

Before the intervention

Among the four teachers, three had Master's degrees in TESOL, one had her master's degree in Applied Linguistics. Their teaching experience ranged from nine years to 18 years. Their general attitudes towards computer use in language teaching were quite negative (over 50%). Especially Hoai, the oldest teacher, had 58% negative answers to computers. Only Hien, the youngest, had more neutral and positive attitude compared to others: 58 % neutral, 17% positive, and 25% negative opinions. (Figure 1)

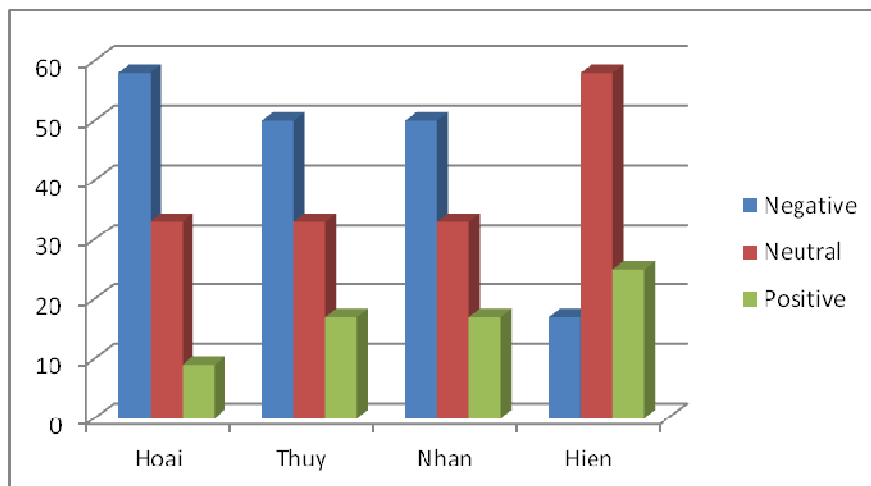


Figure 1: Teachers' attitudes towards computer use in language teaching at the Baseline

After the intervention

The post-intervention questionnaires and in-depth interviews show that the teachers developed more positive attitudes to computer use in their teaching during and at the end of the intervention program. They all reported that they became more confident teaching listening with computers than before. When

asked whether they feared that the computer would replace their roles in the classroom, they all believed that it would likely help them improve their teaching content, and enable them to be closer to the students.

Figure 2 shows the percentage of responses that were negative, neutral and positive for each of the four teachers. After the project, all the four teachers changed to more positive attitudes toward computer use in language teaching (all over 50%). Especially, Hien, the youngest teacher had nearly 60% positive answers. More neutral opinions were chosen by two teachers; the other two kept the same number of neutral opinions as before, but fewer less negative opinions than before. Hoai, the oldest teacher, even suggested that the researcher should think about compiling all the online resources in the intervention programs to put into the department websites for reference after the project. The youngest teacher said that she would like to work with other teachers to develop similar intervention programs for teaching other language skills at the department.

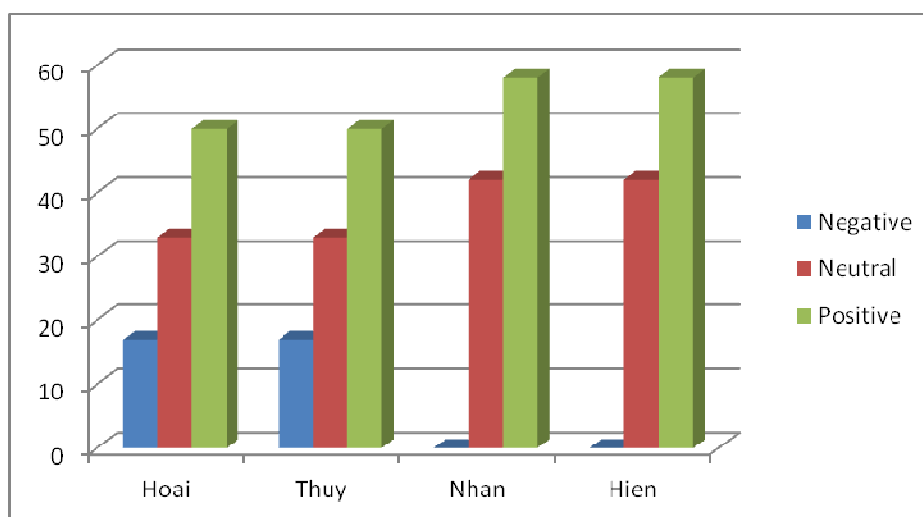


Figure 2: Teachers' attitudes towards computer use in language teaching after the Intervention

Further, at the beginning of the program, all the teachers were quite slow and not confident in using computers in class. However, in the later classes of the intervention process they all managed the computer programs more adeptly and quickly. This helped them save time for further class activities. During the project, Thuy sometimes suggested additional sources for the research team to supplement their materials. Further, Hien, whose skills were the best of the four before the intervention, could contribute significantly to the intervention program. She sometimes suggested changes in the online resources chosen by the research team, and recommended better ones to replace them. To the researcher's delight, the project even inspired Hien to create her own website for teaching listening skills successfully.

Effects of the intervention on EFL students

The students' listening performance was measured by the listening comprehension tests at the English Department of Hanoi University. The statistical software used in the analysis of this data source was SPSS version 19.0 for Windows.

The Independent t-tests were used to compare the mean scores of the two groups, those who received the intervention and the comparison group, in the listening tests before the intervention. These tests were conducted to determine if there were any differences between the means of the dependent variable (i.e.

the listening scores) of the two groups before the project. The results of the t-tests (Term 1: $t = -.42$; Term 2: $t = -.24$; Term 3: $t = -.13$; are all insignificant ($p > .05$), which confirms that there were no significant differences between the scores of the two groups in the baseline period prior to the intervention (Table 1).

To compare the mean scores of the listening performance before and after the intervention, the Paired t-tests were used. For the comparison group, there was no significant difference in listening scores pre and post the period of the intervention ($t = 1.52$, $p > .05$). However, the scores for the intervention group were significantly different ($t = -19.0$, $p < .05$). In other words, the comparison group maintained a steady performance over time, whereas the intervention groups had an improvement in listening performance between Term 3 and Term 4, the period of the intervention (Figure 3). The listening tests increased in difficulty by term so normal development is implied by a consistent mean score. A significant change in mean score implies accelerated development associated with the intervention. This progress may suggest that the use of computers by the teachers helped to enhance the students' listening performance.

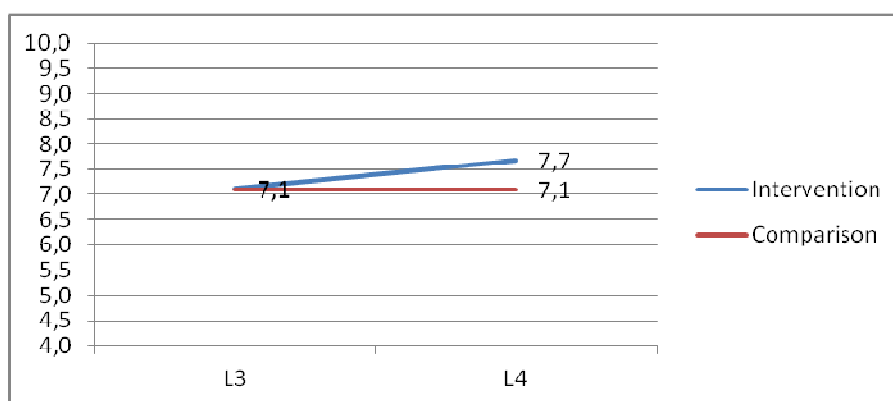


Figure 3: Mean listening scores Pre and Post Intervention for comparison and intervention groups

Conclusion

It is hoped that the study will have significance for EFL teaching practices in Vietnam. Firstly, the study will provide insight into the background of listening skills teaching and CALL knowledge and skills, thus contributing to the theory of CALL application into EFL contexts internationally. Secondly, through identifying the effects of CALL activities to promote listening skills for EFL students, the study is expected to enhance English teaching quality in Vietnam. The study, therefore, suggests that computer use in listening instruction should be given much more consideration so as to improve the listening skills of learners, and to motivate both teachers and learners in EFL contexts.

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