



Making Listening Assignments more Communicative

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Abstract

Communication is a part of the language learning process. Yet listening assignments in language learning methods and tests are very uncommunicative. There is only input, no output and no possibility to steer input. The individualized use of ICT can give the language learner this possibility. We assume the results of listening tests amongst students would improve when we add: (1) the possibility to see the speaker, (2) the possibility to review, and (3) allowing students to control the video themselves. We expected to see improvements for each step. We tested groups of students, who did listening assignments in four different ways: 1. Listening once without video with the teacher controlling the sound device. 2. Listening once with video with the teacher controlling the video device. 3. Listening twice with video with the teacher controlling the video device. 4. Listening and watching a video on the computer that is controlled by the students himself, so he can pause, rewind, fast forward the video. The students did these listening assignments not necessarily in the above-mentioned order. All tests consisted of five multiple choice questions with four choices. In addition, we gave the students short surveys each time, to fill out immediately after the test. The survey consisted of five statements with answers ranging from fully agree to fully disagree. These five statements measured on the one hand the motivation for listening to a speaker in a foreign language and the fear that students might have in not understanding the speaker. We compared the test results of the four different testing methods and the outcomes of the four surveys to answer our question whether students would perform better for each step in the direction of more communicativeness in listening assignments. It turned out that this was not entirely the case. The test results were significantly better after adding repetition of the video and they became even better than that after giving students the possibility to control the video. However there was no significant difference between the results with audio only and with video. Contrary to our expectation adding video doesn't lead to better understanding of the language used in the listening assignment. Adding video, however, did lead to an increase in the motivation of the students. We saw no significant difference between step 2 and 3. Adding repetition improves the understanding of the language, but does not enhance the motivation for the assignment. Full control over the video for the student did not only lead to the best result, but was also most motivating for our students.

More and more studies and organizations emphasize the role of communication in language acquisition. It is clear that speaking is assigned a more important role in education and that reading and writing are increasingly more oriented towards communication, but that listening skills continue to be practiced by means of a segment of spoken text....beep...questions .

In this study, we examined whether it is possible to offer listening skills in a more communicative manner. This is done by examining whether this more communicative manner of testing yields better results and is appreciated more by students. It is important to note here that we did not test listening skills in a communicative situation. In other words, this study does not involve listening skills as part of conversational skills. We have only attempted to simulate a communicative situation by means of images, repetition and interaction within the current method for practicing listening. Our hypothesis: The higher the level of communicativeness, the better the results and higher the student motivation.

Method

Two research methods were used for this study. Firstly, the results of four different listening tests for German, English and French were compared in order to determine which type of test yields the best results for the listening tests. Secondly, a survey was conducted after every listening test to measure student perception of the four types of listening tests. All listening tests are based on digital video fragments from 5 to 7 minutes in length. All of these video fragments can be easily accessed by anyone with an Internet connection. They all show entire or parts of cooking programmes. We chose cooking programmes because the cook often explains what he is doing while he is doing it. This way, the spoken text is supported by the images. The speaker is also often shown while talking. This is a precondition for the effective use of video in listening skills exercises. Accompanying these fragments are five multiple choice questions with four possible answers in every test. Both the questions and



answer options are written in Dutch. Attempts were made to ensure that all questions in all tests are on the same level. This prevents the results from differing from one another, not due to the difference in how the tests are administered but due to the difference in the level of the questions. To test this, a pilot was created that showed that the levels for German, English and French were roughly equal. The differences lie in how they are administered. Four methods were used. These methods represent four different steps towards communicativeness. The first step least resembles natural communication via language and the fourth step best imitates natural communication. (Obviously, the fourth step does not involve a genuinely natural communicative situation). In the first step, the students are given five minutes to read through all questions and answers in order to independently activate their prior knowledge. The fragment is then played in its entirety without the images. In other words, students can only listen to the fragment and have the opportunity to answer the questions while listening, although they can also do so afterwards. They are given another five minutes to answer the questions. During the second step, the students are once again given five minutes to read through all questions and answer options. The video fragment is then shown in its entirety, this time together with the images. Another five minutes are then given to answer the questions. In step 3, the fragment is shown not once, but twice (with images), so that the students have the possibility to listen to any difficult passages an extra time. For step four, the students are given a computer and 15 minutes to read through the questions, view the fragment and answer the questions. Since the students have control over the playback, they can decide which sections they want to hear and watch again. This is radically different than when the lecturer pauses the fragment. Naturally, the student is given the opportunity to concentrate fully on the next question, but not to decide which segment can be viewed and heard a second time and how much time is set aside for reading and answering the questions. Since every student is sitting at his or her own computer, each student can plan and carry out the assignment as he or she prefers. The four different listening tests and the pilot took place at different times, but were administered in the same classes. However, they did not take place in the order described above. This prevented step four from yielding better results than the other steps, not due to its unique administration method, but as a result of familiarisation and, consequently, practice in taking listening tests. Since the administration method is not related to the fragment with corresponding questions, different fragments were linked to the different steps in one class than in the other. This further reduced the possibility that the results would be based on the difference in administration method, rather than on level differences in the tests. All of the tests were taken anonymously, which meant it was not possible to measure individual growth in terms of results. Only the average results (number of correct answers) of the four steps could be compared.

The questionnaire

After each listening test, the students were asked to fill out a questionnaire on the test. The same five statements were given for every listening tests, together with multiple choice answer options on a five-point scale ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5).

1. I enjoyed this listening exercise.
2. I found this listening exercise easy.
3. I often had no idea what was being talked about in this listening exercise.
4. If I was unable to answer a question in this listening exercise, I was afraid I would also be unable to answer the other questions.
5. This listening exercise helped me better understand the language.

These questions examined the extent to which the students are more motivated to take a listening test in response to an increase in communicativeness. The term 'motivation' should be understood as follows: If students enjoy a listening skills exercise, they will be more motivated to carry it out than if they do not enjoy it. In addition, a listening skills exercise should not be so difficult that the student gives up too quickly. The level of difficulty also affects motivation. The same applies to the anxiety caused by not being able to answer questions. The notion that a listening exercise is beneficial to the learning process also increases motivation.

To test whether these five questions do indeed make it possible to examine an overarching concept (i.e. motivation) a Cronbach's alpha test was performed with the initial results (from one English class and one French class). It is customary to speak of a correlation when the result of the Cronbach's alpha test is higher than .750. The result of the test conducted as part of this study was 9.11. In other words, there was a strong correlation between the questions asked.

Like the tests, the surveys were anonymous, so that only the four steps could be compared in terms of the average results per question or the total of the five questions to each other.



Results

Listening test scores

The scores show an ascending line in the results. The average score for step 1 is 2.1 out of 5, 2.2 for step 2 and 2.5 for step 3, while step 4 received the highest score of an average of 3.1 points out of 5. The score for test method 1 does not differ significantly from the score for test method 2. So the addition of images does not result in higher scores. This is also visible in the difference in the increase in scores between these two steps and the much clearer increase between the 2nd and 3rd, as well as the 3rd and 4th steps. This implies that test methods 3 and 4 yield much better results than test methods 1 and 2.

If we assume a reliability rate of 95%, there is no significant difference between steps 2 and 3 in terms of the score for the listening tests. However, the value in the table is .109. But this is significant with a reliability rate of 85%. We believe that the results with a reliability rate of 85% within this study are convincing due in part to the fact that a small test group of 60 students was used. So the results are significant within this limited test group.

Questionnaire results

As described before, Cronbach's alpha test shows that the results of the five questionnaire questions are consistent. Consequently, the average results for the five questions can be included in the description of the results and do not need to be discussed separately. The ANOVA test that compares the various steps shows that at least two steps show significant differences in terms of average questionnaire results. An ascending line in terms of motivation can clearly be seen for the four steps. Looking at the 'average of the 5 questions' variable, students gave step 1 an average score of 2.5. This was 2.8 for step 2 and 3.1 for step 3, whereas step 4 received an average rating of 3.7. The step that most closely resembles the communicative situation therefore generates the highest level of motivation among students.

It is very striking that step 2 does not yield much higher results (as in correct answers) than step 1, but is more appreciated by students. So the addition of images does not result in higher scores, but increases the motivation of students for the test concerned. The exact opposite is true of the difference between steps 2 and 3: the score for step 3 is significantly higher than step 2, but no significant difference is found between the results of the questionnaire. So the repetition of the fragment increases student test scores, but not their motivation.

Conclusion and discussion

We examined different communicative aspects. Repetition, for example, plays an important role in conveying information. A more natural context is created by adding the image of the speaker to the sound, and this has a positive effect on the communication according to a lot of theorists. Our findings however contradict this idea. This raises the question of why the addition of images does not lead to higher scores. This study was unable to answer this question. However, our study does hint at a possible answer: The individual results of step 2 (with images) are further apart than the results of the other steps. This may mean that the addition of images is a significant advantage for some students, while actually a disadvantage for others. Interviews with students showed that the combination of images and sound were considered more entertaining than sound alone, but that the images sometimes shifted their attention away from the written questions on their desk.

Looking at all results, it can be said that our hypothesis that a testing method that most closely resembles a communicative situation will yield the highest score and greatest motivation turned out to be partly correct. The results of this study show that the average score for the listening tests increases as communicativeness increases, but no conclusions can be made about individual students. It is very well possible that some students received lower scores for the fourth step. It might be worthwhile in a follow-up study to determine what percentage of students deviates from the overall trend and the factors that influence this. A possible factor that could lead to some students receiving lower scores for step 4 is a lack of planning skills, which are absolutely necessary for this type of listening test.

Based on these results we can highly recommend language teachers to train and test their students' listening skills by giving them control over the input.

References

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