

University Listening Classes: less product, more process

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Abstract

Listening skills, and receptive language skills as a whole, are often underappreciated, with curriculum designers and teachers choosing to focus on productive skills such as speaking and writing where the performance of students can be assessed via display; listening and reading are skills that are used only when required and are therefore more difficult to assess within course structures. Teaching students the process of listening also requires an appreciation of the meta-level processing of language to isolate and practice discreet skills, a method which requires time and control on the part of both student and teacher. This paper lays out the rationale and procedure of applying a process-based approach to the listening skills teaching in an EFL course at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University, and reports on this project to improve teaching methodologies in the English program.

Key terms: process-based methodology, listening skills, receptive language skills, curriculum development

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Introduction

Listening methodology

Six years of compulsory English study are completed by most Japanese students at the junior high school and high school levels. Much of this education focuses on final products in the forms of test scores and the passing of university entrance examinations. This compulsory language education continues into tertiary education where EFL classes are mandated as part of students' credits for graduation (Nunan, 2003). Recently, the excessive product-oriented nature of such course design and teaching methodology has been gaining attention (Field, 2008). Teachers and students alike are beginning to recognize that sole attention to the outcomes of language learning results in the neglect of the processes involved in the four main language skills. At university, where these students are often focused on the long-term goal of using the language in real-world contexts, a focus on product is less relevant for their study purposes (Ur, 1984).

A more systematic methodology for the teaching of listening skills has long been advocated (Richards 1983; Ur 1984; Field 1998; Field 2008), but it remains an underdeveloped field of study. Many current second language listening courses are founded on a product-based approach. Such courses often involve the following cycle: students listen to a text; they answer questions based on the text; the teacher shares the correct answers. The teaching component is absent from this cycle, and there is little or no opportunity for learners to develop their existing listening skills and strategies except through exposure, which can be a tedious and lengthy undertaking and not one best supported by most university course learning environments. Therefore, when the focus is on product, students are not explicitly exposed to specific listening processes. In other words, the content in many listening classes should more accurately be termed 'testing' not 'teaching'. Field (1998) points out that instead of helping to improve listening effectiveness, many standard listening classes merely stack on more texts to a listener's experience; student are not taught how to process these texts in such classes.

Inherent within EFL curriculum discussions at the tertiary level is the methodology selected as the basis of instruction in a

given institution. Updating the understanding of teaching methodologies should be a priority for improving the curricula of modern universities' faculties if effective language teaching is expected to take place. Language teachers need to apply their skills in a range of courses, and the application of up-to-date pedagogy can assist in their professional development. This course redevelopment project, undertaken with process-based instruction in mind, aims to improve the potential both for students to learn effectively and for teachers to instruct with confidence.

Intermediate English II course at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University

After gaining a better understanding through the review of previous research of some limitations of product-based instruction related to language learning in general, and listening specifically, Intermediate English II (IE2) course designers desired a shift in teaching methodology and materials. The motivation underlying this shift was process-oriented instruction that would introduce skills, strategies and procedures for accomplishing listening goals. In other words, the focus of the listening instructional component of the course would shift from merely finding correct answers to methods for how to access the desired information from the listening texts. This would have the medium-term to long-term goal of making students better listeners in a variety of contexts both on and off campus.

The IE2 course aims, as stated in the Spring 2009 FE2/IE2 Handbook, include product-based outcomes such as increased TOEFL and TOEIC scores and listening/reading course tests. The specified skills detailed in the handbook are listening, reading, and vocabulary development (Blackwell & Haswell, 2009, p. 3). It was felt that a component focusing on cognitive and metacognitive thought processes would also be beneficial to students. The course designers believed that an improvement could be achieved through the development of a methodology and corresponding materials which would help develop within students a skill set, a 'tool box', for receptive skills that they could operate both inside and outside the language learning classroom. The central focus of this approach was listening. However, it must be noted that along with listening, reading is often identified as a receptive skill. Thus, in some cases, the approaches to teaching listening inserted into IE2 during the Fall 2009 semester can also be applied to reading as further examples of receptive process skills provided to students.

Materials redevelopment

Introduction

This project began in the summer of 2009 with a decision to redevelop the listening materials in the IE2 course. The course itself was intended to be a lecture preparation EFL class with a focus upon the TOEFL receptive skills. This aim was the primary focus behind redevelopment efforts in the past that had brought to the fore TOEFL-based listening and reading CALL activities, but to that point had not included much teacher-fronted work on receptive skills or on meta-cognitive skills relating to listening specifically. The intention of this project was to deepen the understanding of the methodology of process-based listening on the part of the teachers, and in doing so, improve the listening skills of the students on the course.

Redevelopment project

The development team of Joe Siegel and Chris Haswell started by looking at the materials that were used in the course. These were mostly video materials presented with and without subtitles in PowerPoint, supported by student worksheets. These worksheet activities were initially centered around cloze or restatement activities that the students were expected to complete in class in real time. The skill set presented to the students was fairly narrow, and was focused on theme and detail questions in a TOEFL style, usually with 4 options. This is the classic example of a product-based teaching cycle: question, answer, check.

It was felt by the development team that maintaining the current video materials for the following semester would make implementation of new activities easier: the teachers on the course had worked with the videos before, if not the style of teaching. Having worked to develop a similar style of teaching in his previous job, Joe Siegel suggested using the transcripts of the videos to identify skills that would open up the videos to deeper investigation by the students. For example, a video that used several organizational markers in the text would be better understood if the students became more aware of discourse markers. This led to

the materials development cycle outlined below.

Materials for the first half of the semester were prepared by Joe Siegel and Chris Haswell, who were then assisted in preparing the second half materials by other IE2 lecturers Doron Klemer and Colin Thompson. Preparing the work required the use of videos that had been preselected for the course which could not be replaced in the short time that was available for new materials development. Therefore the materials developers had to operate within a common development cycle which ensured that the outcomes remained consistent. This cycle began with the transcript of the video, and the assigned lecturer considered what skills were required to make the text accessible to the students.

Skills that had been featured in previous lessons in the course were noted on the worksheets, so that instructors and students were aware of the specific skills being practiced with that particular video or text. This became particularly important where lesson materials could not be completed in class time and students were asked to complete the worksheets as assignments for subsequent classes. By reference to the particular task name, such as 'theme', 'discourse marker', 'genre' etc, students were able to complete the work without specific direction from their instructor, something that had not always been the case in the past. The worksheets became more of an independent study aid than in the past, facilitated by consistency in the naming of the skills.

Materials development cycle

The teaching week was divided into three distinct parts: first, the skill introduction; second, the skill practice; third, the skill review. The materials were trialed in advance of the lesson by other members of the teaching team to gather feedback on their use. Lesson plans were prepared to assist other members of the teaching staff, particularly those new to the course. All the skill introduction materials were made from new videos that needed to be sourced and edited for relevancy to the listening skill being introduced. New PowerPoint materials were also developed, along with online activities that allowed students to provide written work for several of the skills. This included the use of the Blackboard course management system's discussion board tool.

The skills focused on in the course, although ostensibly based upon listening, were also intended to provide assistance for students in reading as well, with skills such as the identification and appreciation of theme, detail, discourse markers, genre and pronouns where there is significant cross-over in their application. Therefore, materials already available online to assist with reading were included in the review section of the weekly materials. This suggested to the students that they could follow up their in-class activities outside of class by using on-line materials they were already aware of to practice particular skills.

Research procedure

Rationale

From the earliest part of this course materials redevelopment project it was felt necessary to gather data on a regular and consistent basis to assist in evaluation of the effectiveness of the changes we were making and help us in their modification, as necessary, in future semesters. In order to determine student attitudes towards this pedagogic shift, the authors conducted two complementary types of research: to gather quantifiable data, weekly in-class surveys were completed via the Blackboard electronic teaching platform for the first quarter of the semester; focus groups were then conducted early in the second quarter to provide more open-ended, anecdotal and qualified responses. Each week was to have a survey during the third lesson after the skill review activity had been completed to gauge student appreciation of the new lesson materials, and how they foresaw them being useful to them in the future. This was intended to continue for the whole semester, but this was later reduced to the first half of the 15 week semester only, as the results of the survey quickly displayed a similar pattern that could assist us in reorganizing the lessons in future semesters. It was also an additional task upon other teachers in the course to administer the survey every week. Additionally, it was felt necessary to use focus groups to ask students the study questions directly, and allow them to give us more qualitative information to better inform our study.

Survey

Before completing the surveys each week, students were told that the surveys were anonymous and would be used to research the

opinions of students on the course and to help with course development. They were free to choose whether to complete the survey or not, and were not required to complete it inside or outside of class time if they did not wish to. We knew from past experience that teacher explanations of the survey and its contents could vary, and therefore the survey items would have to be independently comprehensible to the respondents in order that clarifications leading to misunderstandings would not be commonplace. It was also necessary from a practical standpoint that the surveys take up the minimum of class time. The surveys were therefore copied week-by-week from the previous form, with only the titles being changed. The items remained the same (see Appendix I), as did the procedure for their release to students, which was limited only to those teachers using the new materials through the course management system's selective release function.

The final review survey (see Appendix II) was an amalgam of items similar to the weekly surveys with new items covering all five listening skills from the first quarter, and several open-ended items in which students could provide a written response. This was administered in a similar way to the previous weeks' surveys, allowing a little longer for the students to be able to input their written responses. These responses would form part of the cross-referencing with the focus group interviews to note if these responses were consistent with the spoken responses the students gave.

Focus Groups

In order to provide qualitative support for the survey results, a set of follow-up focus group interviews with students from the course was planned to coincide with the end of the in-class surveys. Students were recruited on a voluntary basis and grouped together by threes or fours, and invited to join the group at the given time. The groups were administered by either Joe Siegel or Chris Haswell, were audio recorded (with the students' consent), and field notes were taken of the pertinent points.

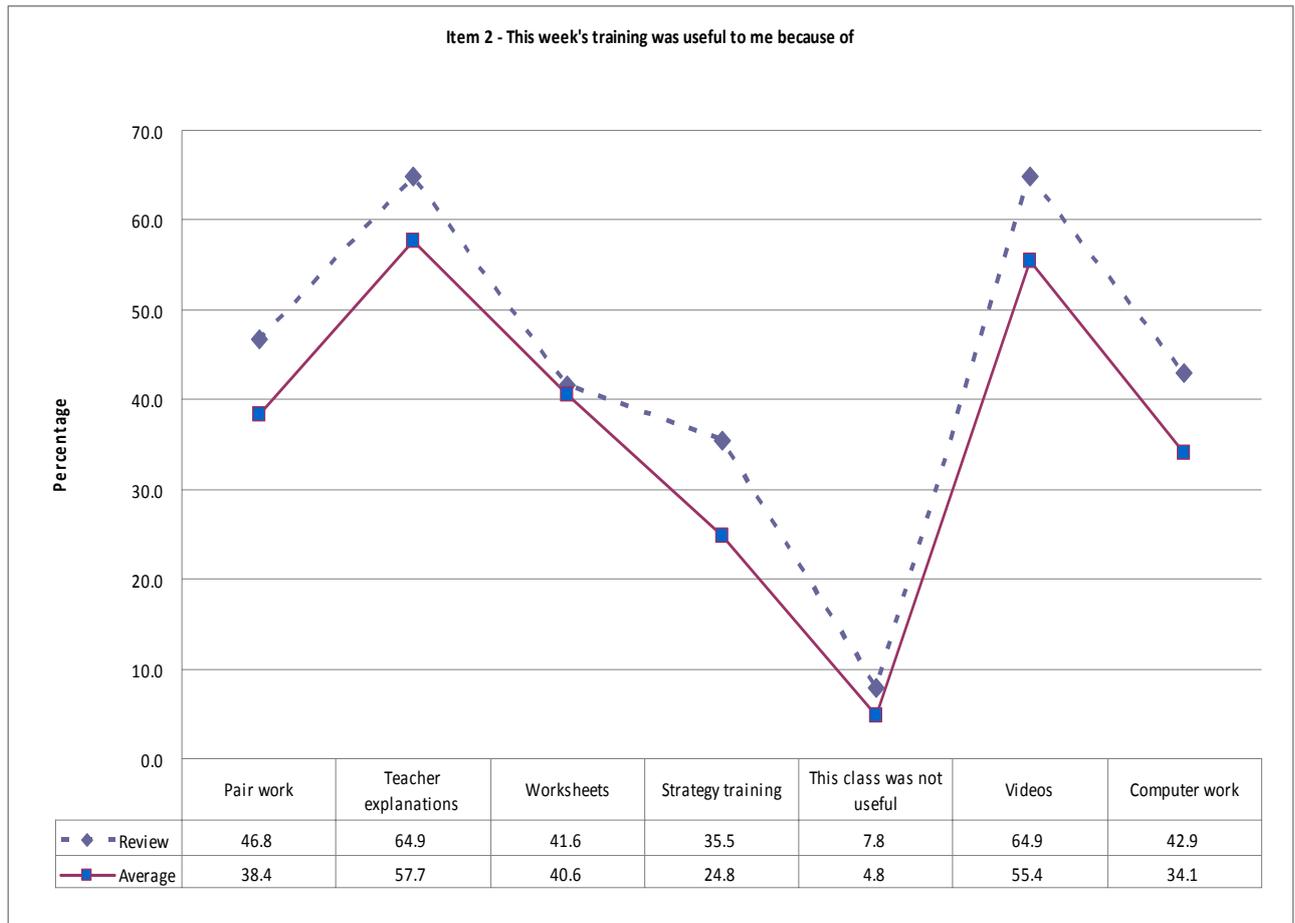
Students in the groups were given a sheet with questions (see Appendix III), some of which were intended to separate their study interests between receptive and productive skills, and also between product-oriented or process-oriented classroom methodologies. This allowed the groups to operate with limited interference from the researcher in the room, and laid out the questions in order that they would be asked. This also served to maintain the consistency of the groups regardless of which researcher was administering the discussion group. The worksheet was laid out to present questions regarding the participant's orientation towards certain types of skills first, followed by their opinions of the listening skills that had been introduced and practiced in the lessons, and finally their opinions of the study of English in general and how their courses might be changed to suit their study purposes. Students were also asked questions similar to those used in the final in-class survey, which asked them to select which of the listening skills they found most useful, and how they saw the skills being useful in their future uses of English.

Study results

Overall, student response to the new methods and materials was favorable; therefore, course designers intend to continue to build on the process-based approach in subsequent semesters. The following paragraphs describe the collected data in more detail.

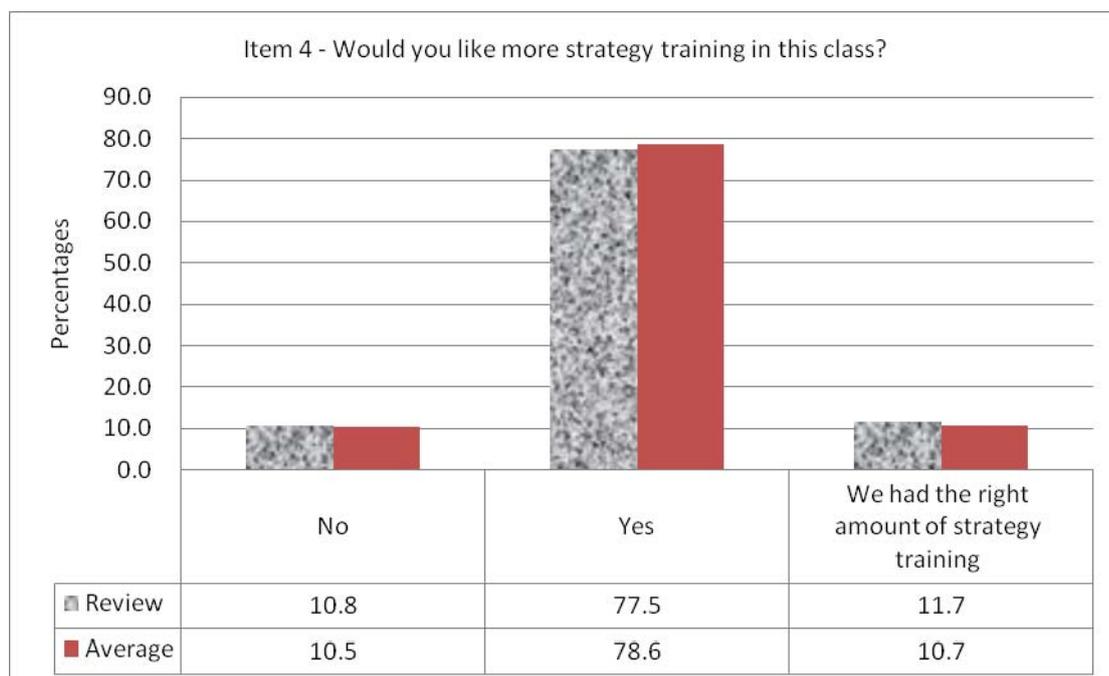
Survey

As the data from this study is extensive, only items relevant to providing an overview of reactions to class materials and student appreciation of the redevelopment project will be given here.



Item Two on the survey asked students to rank standard aspects of the class according to their usefulness. The component “Teacher explanations” consistently scored higher than others over the six weeks. These explanations varied by teacher but all centered on the thought processes native English listeners use to comprehend incoming speech. Explanations included techniques such as verbal descriptions, examples, gestures, diagrams, and other visual aids. Another high-ranking element of the course was the selection of videos shown in lecture classes on Tuesdays. These videos had been cut into short segments. Prior to watching the videos, PowerPoint slides demonstrated and/or reinforced specific approaches to listening. After the videos, students were encouraged to apply similar techniques to different language and/or contexts.

Interestingly, the survey item named “Strategy training” received low rankings. This was surprising because other responses indicated that students recognized the value of the strategy and the process-based approach. One possible explanation for this seemingly contradictory finding is that students did not understand the meaning of the term “Strategy training”. When placed with other discreet options this did not appear to the students to be the most important, but when asked to consider ‘training’ as a whole as an in-class activity students recognized its value, as in the aforementioned item. A second possible reason is that student recognition of the strategy training that took place in class was tenuous. In other words, students were being exposed to strategy training, but they did not know it at the time. Nevertheless, this lone conflicting finding is largely countered by the robust indicators that the process-oriented approach and materials were positively received by most students in IE2. Support for the new methodology was also expressed in focus groups.



Since this was likely the first time these students had been exposed to process-based training meant to foster learner autonomy, it was felt necessary to ask the following general question on the survey: *Would you like more strategy training in this class?* Over the course of six weeks, approximately 10% of students stated that an increase in strategy training was undesirable. An additional 10% responded that the amount of strategy training was appropriate. An overwhelming 80% of students stated that more strategy training for IE2 is appealing. As displayed in the chart above, these numbers remained consistently high throughout the quarter.

These results can be interpreted in a number of ways. First of all, with approximately 90% of students responding that the right amount of training was being offered or that more training is desirable, it can be said that a vast majority of students see the value in this methodology as applied to listening. This analysis has positive implications for the shift in methodology and materials. Another interpretation could view the 80% of students who want more strategy training as stating that more training is necessary because the current level is insufficient. If this viewpoint is accepted, the strategy component has less positive effects. However, based on other questionnaire responses and comments made during the focus groups, it seems a majority of students found the new approach and materials sensible and advantageous.

Focus groups

Over the course of two weeks, nine separate focus groups consisting of one to three students met to discuss both student attitudes towards English study in general and the IE2 course specifically. In total 17 students participated in these discussion groups, which were supervised by either Joe Siegel or Chris Haswell and were conducted in English.

One of the key topics of the focus groups was the following question: *Which do you prefer to do in class, learn how to listen or listen for correct answers?* The essence of this question is the difference between process-based and product-based instruction. In total, 11 of the 17 participants favored the process-oriented approach to the teaching of listening. These students preferred learning how to listen by understanding thought processes that lead to the unlocking of meaning and comprehension of aural input. Four students stated that they wanted to listen for correct answers, reflecting their desire for product-based instruction. The remaining two students did not respond to this item.

When asked to elaborate on the reasons why she preferred to learn how to listen, one student commented that, “Six years of listening for answers is enough.” As explained above, the six-year period being referred to is probably the compulsory English study

Japanese students undergo in junior high school and high school. This student may be hinting at some underlying frustration with a purely product-based system. Additionally, the discontent with focusing on answers could correspond with a realization that in a product-based approach, existing listening skills are not developed and new listening skills are not introduced.

Meanwhile, another item covered in the focus groups related to future use of the skills and strategies introduced and practiced in IE2. All 17 students indicated that they believe these processes will be useful in future English encounters. These responses relate to two different aspects of future out-of-class autonomous activation of the listening processes. First, several students mentioned that the listening skills and strategies from IE2 would be helpful during study abroad programs in English speaking countries. These students recognize the importance of English listening skills in a globalized world. A second set of responses pointed to the usefulness of these listening processes in occupational settings. One student stated: "I want to work in an international airport. I can help people, listen to announcements, and solve problems." These several examples of student intentions to use the listening skills in the future, beyond the classroom and in the "real world", should be viewed as a progressive step in helping to foster learner autonomy through strategy training. It seems a good deal of students in IE2 appreciate the benefits of this methodology in addition to the product-oriented goals related to TOEFL / TOEIC stated in the IE2 Handbook (see above).

Conference Presentation – Seoul, March 2010

Presentation & Workshop

The redevelopment project was presented at the KOTESOL conference in Seoul in late March 2010, under the title "University Listening Classes: Less Product, More Process". The research rationale and relevant background was discussed first, and then the attendees were shown examples from the course, our materials development cycle, and then given the chance to work with other attendees to prepare lesson ideas using video materials. The workshop ended with us collecting ideas from the various groups of attendees in the room, outlining how we covered that material in our lessons, and giving a brief overview of the data collected in our research.

Approximately 50 people attended the presentation. The presentation and workshop went smoothly, with participants offering several ideas during the materials development section. Participants generated many of the ideas we expected them to, a fact that demonstrated they had applied the theory and planning tips we had previously outlined. Specifically, one participant discussed the importance of reinforcing the receptive and cognitive links between listening and reading skills. While our research and workshop focused only on listening pedagogy, this point reminds us that we should constantly be demonstrating to students that the micro-skills and strategies can be transferable between reading and listening.

Q&A and Feedback

During the Question and Answer session that followed the workshop, a number of intriguing issues were raised. The first related to assessment. Since our workshop centered on teaching the process of listening rather than solely on the product (correct multiple choice answers, for example), one audience member asked how we evaluate our students. We do not, in fact, currently evaluate the application of the listening strategies we teach, and the development and implementation of process evaluation will be part of APU's 2011 curriculum reform with the Center for Language Education.

Another question was about our teaching schedule and ways in which we incorporate listening strategies in our classes. This inquiry allowed us to describe the Introduction, Practice, and Review cycle that we use on a weekly basis. It was also noted that we recycle strategies throughout the course in order to remind students to use them. Attendees seemed interested in this implementation aspect of our project. Most appeared to be able to apply the theoretical and materials development advice and were interested in applying this methodology in practice.

Another point raised by the audience related to directions for future research. A participant inquired about the connections between strategy use and critical thinking; As Field states "listening strategies have the potential to increase learner autonomy" and through questions such as that regarding critical thinking we were able to raise awareness of what we viewed as the need for

scaffolding and recycling of strategy training in the Asian context, where in our experience learning autonomy in language development may be underdeveloped. It would be interesting to investigate the critical thinking students utilize in order to select certain strategies over others depending on their immediate task. We will include these points in our discussions of the redevelopment of our listening methodologies in the English courses as we work towards the new curriculum for Spring 2011.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to outline why and how process-oriented listening instruction was included in the IE2 course during the Fall 2009 semester, how this redevelopment project was studied, and how it was presented for other language teachers to observe and provide feedback. A report of student attitudes indicated that this pedagogical shift was beneficial and appreciated. As English teachers and students in Japan continue to recognize the deficiencies of product-based instruction, the inclusion of procedures, skills and strategies will likely (and hopefully) become more common. Support for listening strategy training is gaining momentum among experts; for example, Helgesen & Brown (2007) cite Nunan, who states that teachers should “Teach listening strategies: Learners who are aware of a range of strategies, and who are able to match their strategies to their listening purposes, will be better listeners and better learners” (p. 147). Additional endorsement for such process-based methodology comes from IE2 students and teachers.

While these early indications are encouraging, revisions and further development of the teaching approaches described in this paper are necessary and will be undertaken in the future. Future work on this project will include the trialing of new materials intended for the 2011 curriculum in the Fall 2010 semester course of IE2. These efforts will be informed by experience to this point, feedback from students in the course, teachers of IE2, and further research into this methodology. It is hoped that processed-based methodology will set the standard within the English program and provide a guide for the implementation of further revisions to our language skills teaching.

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Appendix I - Weekly Survey Items

1. This week's skill training helped my English listening skills.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree

2. This week's training was useful to me because of: (please check all that apply)

Strategy training

This class was not useful

Pair work

Teacher explanations

Videos

Worksheets

Computer work

3. Which skill activities helped you the most?

Rank them from Most Useful to Least Useful. Each choice can be used only ONCE

Most Useful

Least Useful

Monday IPS Introduction Activity

Monday IPS Teacher Explanations

Tuesday Lecture Worksheet

Tuesday Lecture Teacher Explanations

Thursday IPS Skill Review

4. I would like more skill training in this class.

No

Yes

We had the right amount of strategy training

5. I would like more skill training in other English classes.

No

Yes

6. I will probably use these skills in the future when listening:

To conversations

In classes (English and others)

To movies

To academic lectures

To informational announcements (like in an airport)

To instructions (such as from a teacher)

To music

Appendix II – Review Survey Items

1. Intermediate English II skill training helped my English listening skills.

Strongly disagree

Somewhat disagree

Somewhat agree

Strongly agree

2. Please write an example of how these listening skills helped you:

3. Of these skills, which do you use less, which do you use more, and which do you use the same as before?

Less than before Same as before More than before

Theme

Detail

Markers

Genre

Long listening

4. Which of these activities was useful to you?: (please check all that apply)

Computer work

Worksheets

Videos

This class was not useful

Strategy training

Pair work

Teacher explanations

5. Which skill activities helped you the most?

Rank them from Most Useful to Least Useful. Each choice can be used only ONCE

Most Useful

Least Useful

Monday IPS Introduction Activity

Monday IPS Teacher Explanations

Tuesday Lecture Worksheet

Tuesday Lecture Teacher Explanations

Thursday IPS Skill Review

6. I would like more skill training in this class.

No

Yes

We had the right amount of strategy training.

7. What type of listening skill would you like to practice in this class?

