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Developing Web-Based Listening Exercises: Pedagogic Principles and Materials Design

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Abstract

This paper describes the pedagogic principles and design of Web-based listening exercises for tertiary-level Chinese EFL learners. Following the claim that videos and multimedia resources assist listening comprehension (e.g., Brett, 2000), as well as the framework for grading listening input suggested by Brown and Yule (1983), the exercises are based on local television and radio programmes, and are graded from static to dynamic to abstract. The exercises carefully guide and prepare the learners from the pre-listening stage to the post-listening stage. A variety of exercises, such as listening for information, opinion and inference, and partial dictation, were developed. The learners are free to listen to or watch the materials as many times as they need, and they can view the tape script whenever necessary. Last, the paper highlights some technical problems when selecting, preparing and loading authentic tapes and videos onto the Internet for listening practice.

Introduction

Listening is an active skill that requires a listener to activate various types of knowledge in order to understand the message. Listening is a demanding task because people do not simply pick up words; they have to interpret the meaning and acquire the ability to respond in a variety of situations and inputs. Many first language speakers have difficulty acquiring the skills, and need to have sufficient training (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). Listening is particularly demanding and difficult for second or foreign language (L2) learners because of their inadequate linguistic ability

(e.g., to understand intonation and stress, colloquial expressions and accent, etc.), interpretation problems, established learning habits, inability to concentrate (e.g., fatigue) and topic unfamiliarity (Ur, 1984; Underwood, 1989). L2 learners encounter various problems while they are decoding sounds and interpreting messages. The source of these problems might be the learners themselves. For example, they may have inadequate linguistic and background knowledge of the topic, the speakers and even the context. If the speakers' accent and vocabulary use are unfamiliar to the learners, or if they speak quickly, the

learners might not be able to catch the words and the meaning of the messages. In many situations, listeners cannot control how quickly the speakers speak. What listeners can do most of the time, in a face-to-face situation, is to ask the speakers to repeat the message. If the context in which the interaction takes place is noisy, it may produce extra information (i.e., 'noise') for L2 learners (Ur, 1984). My teaching experience confirms the fact that the idealized classroom learning environment, such as slow and careful articulation of English teachers and the use of headphones for listening practice, further aggravates the problems in authentic communication. Many of my first-year university L2 learners are frustrated when listening to authentic conversations. Their frustration is understandable because, according to Anderson and Lynch (1988, p. 13), L2 learners require at least two principal sources of information for successful understanding and interpretation of message: systemic or linguistic knowledge and schematic or non-linguistic knowledge.

Using Information Technology for the Learning and Teaching of Listening Skills

Differences between Multimedia and Web-Based Teaching

The advances in technology make possible other tools for learning and teaching listening skills. In addition to the claim that tape recorders and videos assist listening comprehension (e.g., Brett 2000), the Internet and multimedia CD-ROMs are other possible learning and teaching tools. Multimedia generally is the integration of text, voice, graphics and video modes of information, and seldom includes any interaction among the users who are

working on the same multimedia programme. Interaction might take place between the user and the computer program; however, the interaction is very limited and impersonal. Web-based teaching works on networked computers such as a local area network (LAN) or computer networks like the Internet.

Advantages of Web-based Teaching for the Learning and Teaching of Listening Skills

Web-based teaching allows two-way interaction between the users (e.g., teachers and students or students and students), flexibility in learning and choice of optional materials, in addition to flexibility in teaching, such as presenting visual materials¹. Learners can access the materials either on campus or at home. They can see the speakers on the Web, thus making them feel the presence of the speakers; and their attention can be held longer. Moreover, learners can click and get to the explanations of vocabulary items from electronic dictionaries, link the grammar points with the texts and vice versa, and work on the same exercise again and again if they are not satisfied with their performance. The flexibility in learning, choice and visibility of speakers not only fosters the development of listening skills but also of independent learning skills.

In view of the need to fill the gap between learning listening in an idealized classroom situation and in real-life communication, as well as the advantages of using information technology and computers for learning and teaching the skills, a Web-based English learning programme was initiated, with listening as one of the components. In this paper, I describe the pedagogic principles of the listening exercises, followed by examples and advice.

Multimedia English Learning Web² (MELW) is a Web-based English learning programme for tertiary L2 learners who major in social science and science at Hong Kong Baptist University. It aims to enhance English proficiency and independent learning skills in English, but with some guidance available, within a virtual community. It is aware of learner factors, input factors and task factors that influence the quality of learning. MELW provides ample thematic, authentic, graded and integrated exercises for listening, grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing in context. The materials are taken from local audio and visual sources, including radio and television programmes, and interviews of celebrities, developed by the team. The programme has six themes³, chosen according to the results of a student survey. The graded exercises (from Levels 1 to 3) are a suggested learning pathway, guiding the learners to attempt exercises of different degrees of difficulty. Learners can start with the level they feel comfortable with. There is no restriction on, or pre-requisite for, each skill and level.

Pedagogic Principles of the Listening Exercises of MELW

The listening exercises of MELW cover a wide range of practice types, from static to dynamic, including recognizing word stress and pronunciation, being aware of syllables, listening for facts and information, checking comprehension and expressing opinion (e.g., listening and speaking, listening and giving written response). The pedagogic principles of the listening exercises on MELW are described below.

Principle 1: Provision of authentic, adapted and self-developed thematic local audio-

visual materials for listening practice. The listening materials are taken from a wide range of authentic, adapted and self-developed audio-visual materials from local sources such as radio programmes, documentary programmes and interviews, in accordance with the six themes (please refer to endnote 3). Local materials are preferred because the learners are more familiar with local topics, thus eliminating the worry of topic unfamiliarity. The learners will find listening interesting if they can see the visual images. Given the developments in technology, video clips can be uploaded on the Web and accessed immediately, followed by a variety of listening exercises such as comprehension check (for examples, see Diagrams 1–9).

Principle 2: Provision of graded listening exercises with appropriate instructions and guidance. The listening exercises should be graded, and should require the learners to produce output similar to the static, dynamic and abstract categories in speaking (Brown & Yule, 1983, quoted in Anderson & Lynch, 1988, p. 55). The three categories are not speaking-specific but are applicable to listening. The static category for listening practice can ask the learners to describe the stress pattern or word stress; the dynamic category can tell the learners to report the main ideas and instructions; and the abstract category can invite the learners to express their opinions based on the information they have heard. The exercises should start from easy and progress to difficult, giving learners the confidence to begin and the challenge to sustain interest. In addition to the difficulty level of the exercises, the learners should be given sufficient input, preparation and clear instructions (e.g., how many times to listen to the tape) before they

start the practice. Preparation should include some pre-listening exercises such as predicting the contents according to some given hints and information, or familiarizing the learners with the new words that they will hear on the tape. These pre-listening exercises will increase the learners' confidence in decoding and comprehending the new message through the provision of both systemic and schematic knowledge of the topic. If the learners find they are not able to comprehend the message, they can read the tape script before attempting the exercises that follow the message. The while-listening exercises should cover different difficulty levels, ranging from syllable recognition, factual description, to the interpretation of speakers' intentions. Listening should also integrate with other language skills in order to consolidate the acquisition of the skills and language learning. The integrated exercises can be used as post-listening exercises. For instance, the learners can express their opinions after listening to an interview (for examples, see Diagrams 3–10). In addition,

the learners should be allowed to listen to the same tape or watch the same video as many times as they like. However, it is useful to include some instructions that advise the learners not to repeat the video too many times, or read the tape script whenever necessary.

Principle 3: Provision of immediate feedback. It is important to let the learners know how they performed immediately after the completion of an exercise (either a pre-listening or a while-listening exercise). They can see their scores, their answers and the model answers. The comparison between their answers and the model answers will help them spot and reflect on the errors. If they have any questions about the model answers, they should be given an opportunity to seek advice from teachers. Features such as See scores, See answers, and See your answers may be useful in providing immediate feedback. Diagram 1 is a printout from the programme that illustrates the features previously mentioned.

The screenshot shows a web browser window titled "(MELW) Multimedia English Learning Web - Microsoft Internet Explorer". The address bar shows "http://www.melw.hkbu.edu.hk/login.php3". The main content area displays "Task 1.3 Scores" with a score of 25.00% and a mean score of 54.72% for other students. Below this is a table of answers for Task 1.3, with feedback (F/T) provided for each item. The interface also includes a sidebar with navigation links like Home, Topic, Links, Tutor Profile, Chat Room, Note Pad, Feedback and Comments, Change Password, Logout, and Acknowledgements. On the right side, there are buttons for "Try Again?", "Go To Task 1.4", and "See answers".

Task 1.3 Scores		
Your Score: 25.00%		
Mean score of other students : 54.72%		
Try Again? Go To Task 1.4 See answers		
Your answers:		
1.	Transsexuals feel that they are imprisoned by their bodies.	[F]
2.	Transsexuals are happy with their gender.	[T]
3.	Many people understand how transsexuals feel.	[F]
4.	Femininity and masculinity can be defined easily.	[T]
5.	Sex reassignment surgeries is long and painful.	[F]
6.	Many transsexuals feel secure enough to reveal their identity.	[F]
7.	Transsexuality is a gender identity disorder.	[F]
8.	Science has the answer to why someone is born transsexual.	[T]

Diagram 1: Provision of learning opportunities and immediate feedback

Web-based listening exercises: examples

The following screen captures are the different types of listening exercise taken from the programme. Diagram 2 is a pre-

listening exercise that encourages the learners to predict what they will hear from the tape.

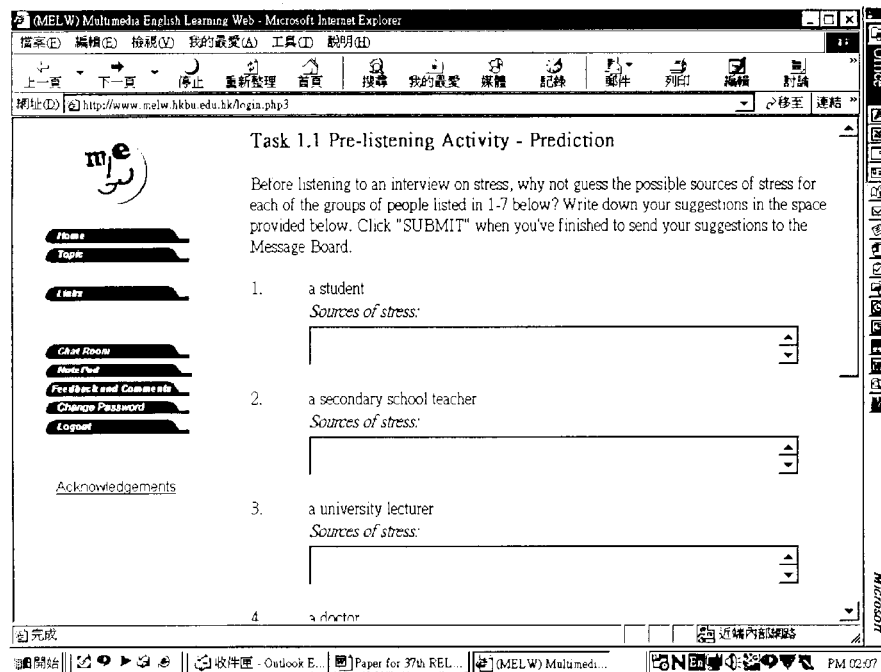


Diagram 2: Pre-listening exercise

Diagram 3 is a while-listening exercise, asking the learners to listen for new words by clicking the number of times they hear

the unfamiliar words given below while watching the video.

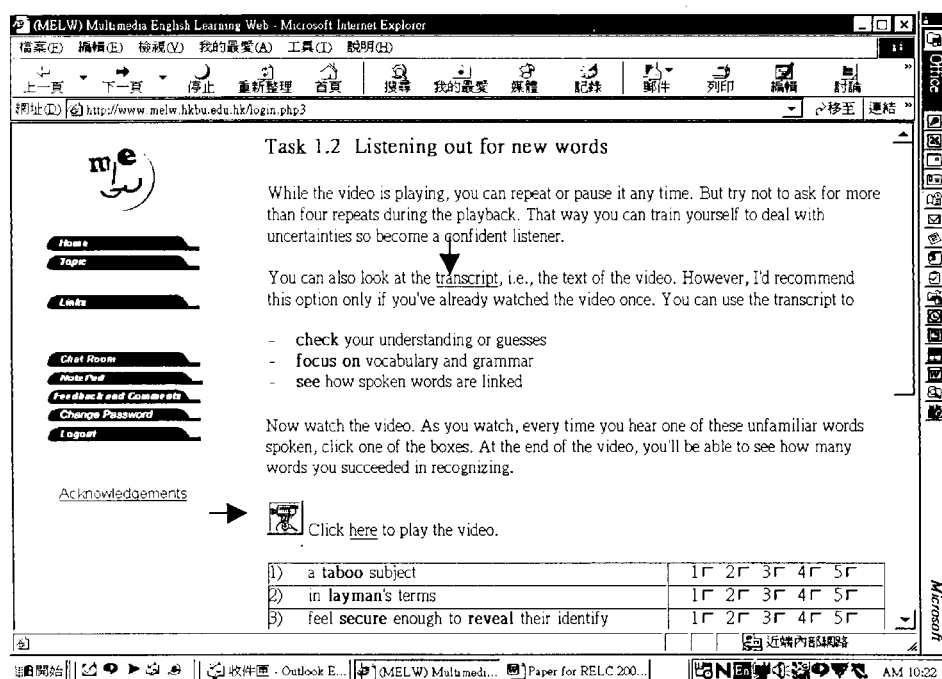


Diagram 3: While-listening exercise (1)

Diagram 4 requires the learners to listen for details. It checks their comprehension of

the information presented and described in the interview.

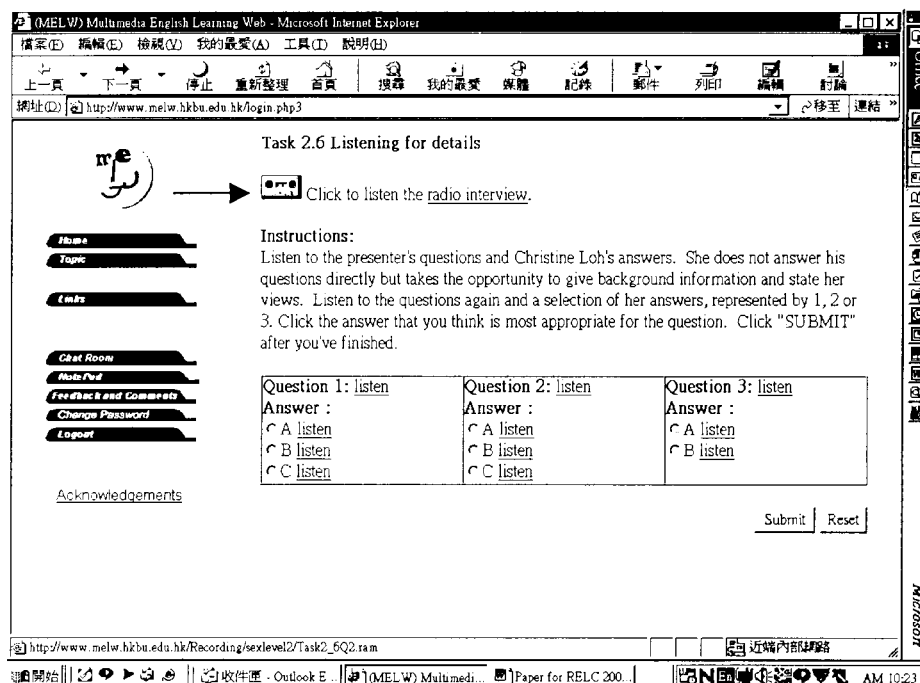


Diagram 4: While-listening exercise (2)

Diagrams 5 and 6 illustrate two listening exercises in the static and dynamic categories. Diagram 5 asks the learners to identify the stressed syllable. This exercise increases the learners' awareness of word

stress and pronunciation. Diagram 6 asks the learners to check the prediction they have made about the content, based on the description given by the text.

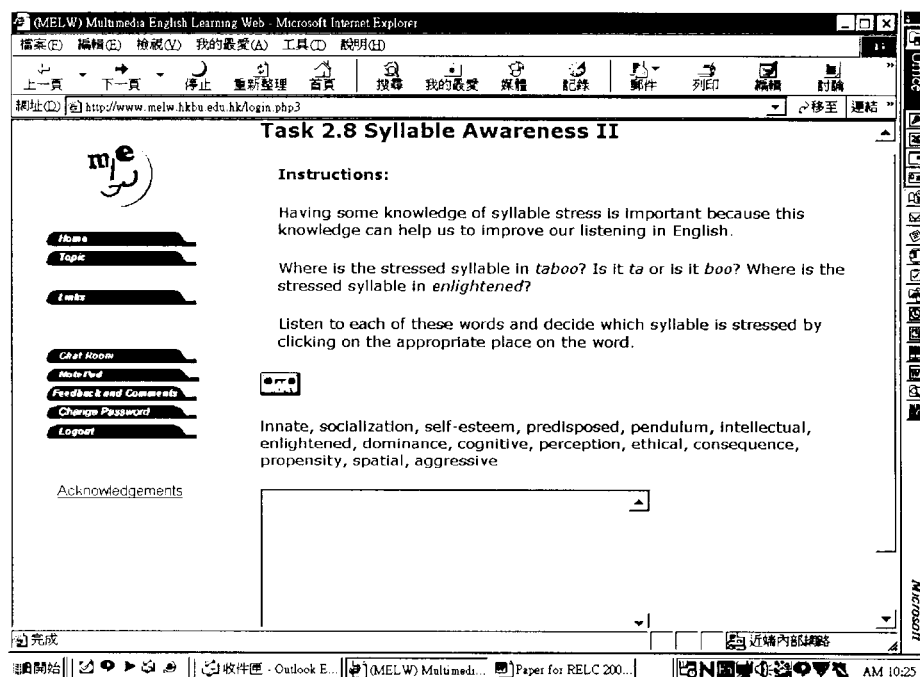


Diagram 5: While-listening exercise (3)

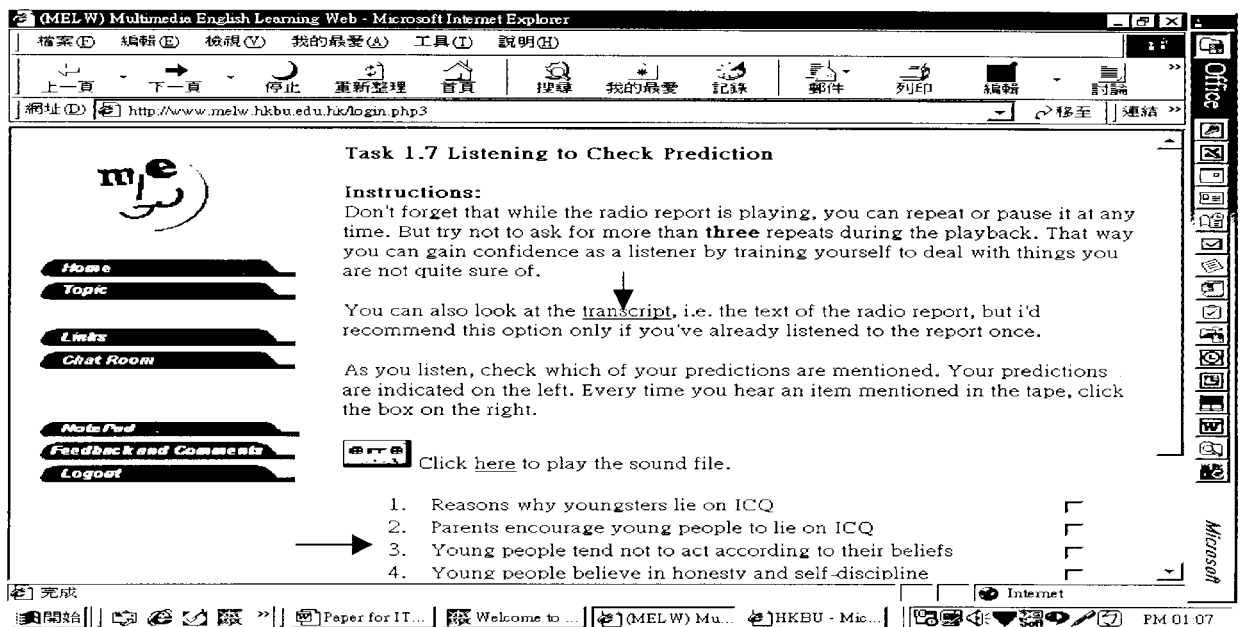


Diagram 6: While-listening exercise (4)

Diagrams 7 to 9 are post-listening exercises, showing how listening can be integrated with linguistic knowledge and

other language skills, such as the acquisition of vocabulary (Diagram 7), speaking (Diagram 8) and writing (Diagram 9).

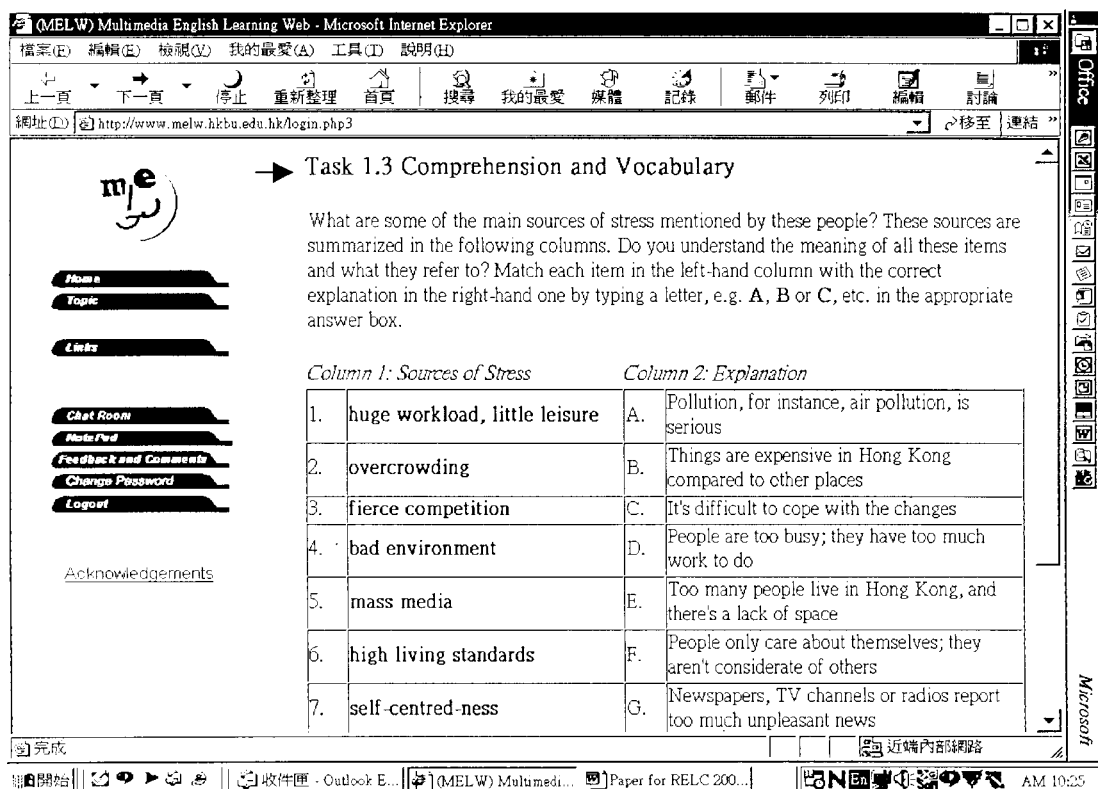


Diagram 7: Post-listening exercise (1)

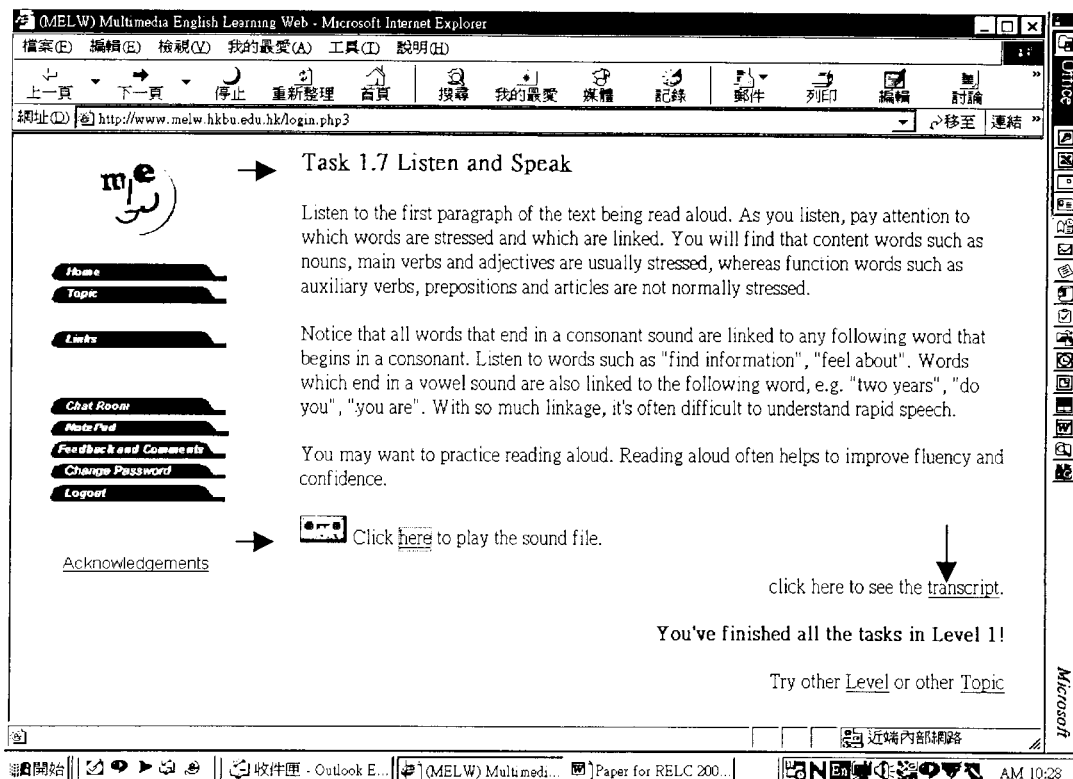


Diagram 8: Post-listening exercise (2)

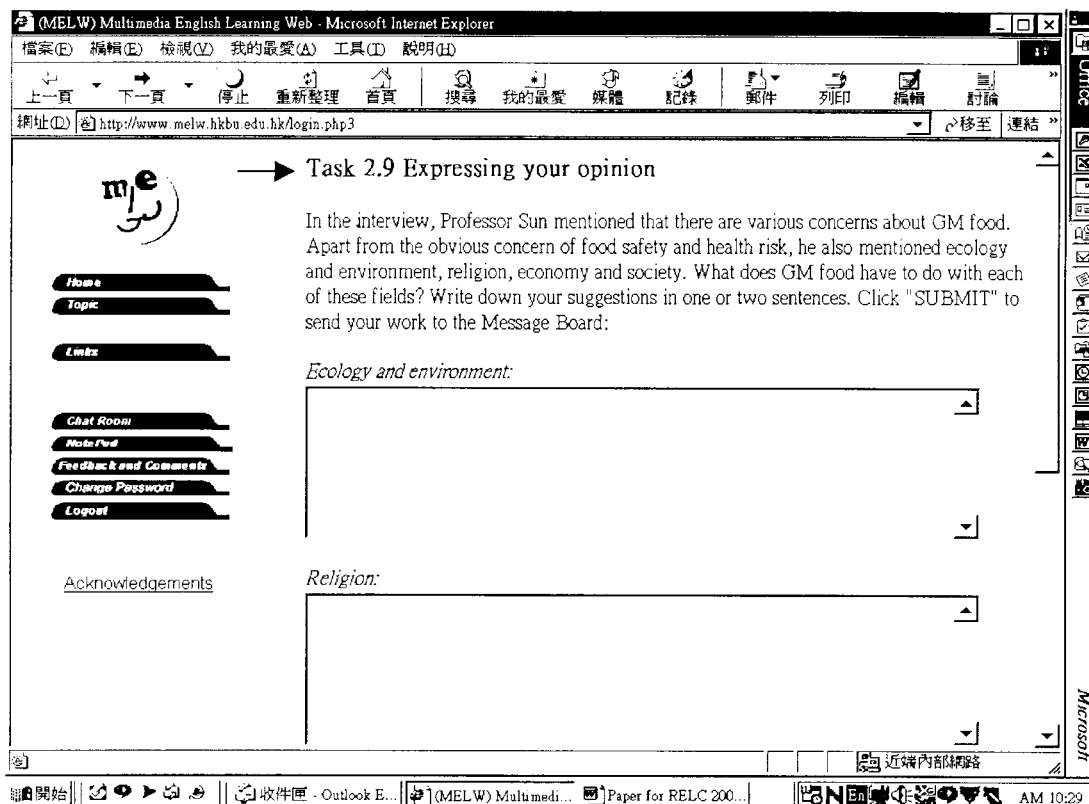


Diagram 9: Post-listening exercise (3)

Technical Problems to be Aware of when Selecting, Preparing and Uploading Audio-visual Materials

Seeking and selecting authentic listening materials. Although you want to choose a particular topic for listening practice, you may not be able to find the appropriate authentic radio and television programmes. It may take some time to write to the sources to search for the appropriate tape or video. If the appropriate sources cannot provide you with the information you need, another way is to develop your own listening materials or adapt some existing materials. Before using commercial sources, you should obtain copyright permission from the companies or publishers. After selecting the appropriate listening materials and obtaining copyright permission, you should digitalize⁴ them (seek help from a technician whenever necessary) with a view to standardizing the different video formats (e.g., avi, mpg, rm, asf, mov, etc.), editing and manipulating the video (e.g., you may want your students to listen to a particular part of the video again for partial dictation practice) within the computer for teaching purposes.

Downloading and receiving signals by learners on the Web. One of the biggest problems in using audio-visual materials on the Web for the learning and teaching of listening skills is their speed of delivery. Although learners will be fascinated by the video clips, if they do not have broadband to receive signals, the waiting time for the video clips will be long. To solve the problem of slow delivery, it is useful to put the video clips on the intranet or on a CD-ROM for loan.

Developing Web-based listening exercises. Technology enables us to attempt both objective and subjective types of listening exercise on the Web, such as multiple choice, true-false, matching, puzzles and open-ended questions. However, objective exercises such as true-false and matching are preferable for Web-based teaching and are more convenient for marking and giving feedback (particularly if you want to show the scores). Answers for open-ended questions such as free response may require feedback from teachers. Before deciding on the type(s) of exercise for learners, it is a good idea to consult technicians about the feasibility and layout of each type of exercise. Designing objective exercises with feedback is related to programming, whereas presenting information on the screen is related to Web-page design. It is advisable to present both the exercise and its instructions on the same screen. Both parts should be concise and be presented with appropriate font size (a small font size strains the eyes of learners and kills their interest). This facilitates reading and is convenient for doing the exercise. Be patient when seeking technical advice⁵.

Writing instructions for Web-based listening materials. To enable learners to see both the exercise and its instructions on the same screen, the instructions must be short and clear. Since learners can access the exercises themselves at home, the probability of discontinuing the practice will be higher than in the classroom, if they feel bored. You could personalize the instructions by using the personal pronoun 'I', assuming that you are talking to learners face-to-face. The following example illustrates the difference between lengthy and clumsy instructions and short and clear

instructions by comparing the original version of a listening exercise in MELW and its revised version.

Original version of a listening exercise:

While the video is playing, you could repeat, fast forward or pause it any time. Try not to ask for repetition for more than four times during the playback because you might want to train yourself to deal with uncertainties and gain confidence in listening. You could see the transcript, i.e., the text of the video. I'd recommend these options only if you've already watched the video once. You could use the transcript to check your understanding or guesses, focus on vocabulary and grammar, and see how spoken words are linked. (103 words)

Revised version of the listening exercise:

While the video is playing, you may repeat or pause it at any time. Try not to repeat it more than four times during the playback. That way you can train yourself to deal with

uncertainties, so becoming a confident listener. You may also look at the transcript, i.e., the texts of the video, but I'd only recommend these options if you've already watched the video once. You can use the transcript to check your understanding. (76 words)

Conclusion

The Internet and computers facilitate the learning and teaching of listening skills by allowing flexibility in learning pace, choice of materials and presentation. Learners will be fascinated by seeing visual images on the Web. However, learners may not be able to benefit from the new teaching and learning mode if computer traffic jams are frequent, or if the broadband is not available. Teachers should be aware of the technical problems and tackle them (e.g., by putting videos on CD-ROM for learners who do not have computers at home) before using the technology for teaching listening.

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¹ *Draft report of the IT strategy committee*, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Nov. 1998, 21–22.

² MELW was a \$1.9 million project (competitive bids) funded by a teaching development grant from the University Grants Committee, Hong Kong SAR Government, from 1999–2001. It was a joint project between Hong Kong Baptist University and the Chinese University of Hong Kong. Lee was the Principal Supervisor of the project.

³ Three social science and three science related themes that had been highly rated by the students were developed for the programme. They are: gender issues, the Internet, stress and emotional quotient management (social science themes); genetically modified food, genetic engineering and nuclear energy and safety (science themes).

⁴ Digitalizing an analogue video will help you edit and/or manipulate the images. Since the process of video digitalization takes up a lot of memory and space on your computer, you should have a computer with higher Ram (128 Mbyte Ram), a faster compatible processor (e.g., Pentium II 450), and a larger hard disk capacity for capture or playback of video (e.g., 20 Gbyte). Streaming is another technique to release video online and the file will be much smaller. Thus, the loading time is faster for students when they watch the video on the Web.

⁵ For details of this point, see Lee, C.F.K. (2001). An interactive multimedia CD-ROM for learning vocabulary. Guidelines, 23, (1), 18.