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LISTENING COMPREHENSION:
AUDIO-ONLY VS. AUDIO-VISUAL APPROACHES

RELATORE
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Introduction

In the Piano quadro degli studi per le scuole di maturità (1994) in Ticino we read that English is the international language of choice for communication in the entire world. Moreover, the advancements in technology and in sociocultural elements that is an integral component of our youth’s life call for critical thinking that can only come through linguistic knowledge and understanding. English, then, becomes one central tool through which our students can communicate virtually everywhere and in every field, including daily life, science, art, culture, and politics.

When we think of communication, we cannot help but to include the element of listening comprehension. Listening is an integral component of real life applications in terms of language. If we are preparing students for a meaningful integration into society as full contributors and active participants, we know that much of their interactions in a plurilingual society will involve listening. This includes but is not limited to listening during informal and formal face-to-face interactions, listening to lectures, and listening to programs delivered through TV, Internet, social media, etc. (see Ur, 1984, p. 2, for a thorough list of examples of the types of listening comprehension contexts that are considered the norm in our society). All types of listening usually require some kind of response, be it oral, written, or simply personal and reflective. Anderson and Lynch (1988) confirm that listening is primarily a reciprocal skill in real-life situations.

In the language classroom, listening comprehension is the linguistic skill that students in the Scuole Medie Superiori enrolled in language courses often find the most challenging (Graham, 2006). Incidentally, listening is perhaps the most prevalent linguistic skill employed in a language class, as students are continuously listening to their instructor, their peers, and various authentic didactic materials. In classroom language teaching (as in all other teaching, presumably), there is room for teacher talk and even more for other forms of listening, such as peer discussions and conversations. Listening is often a starting point to actuate teaching and learning a language, both deliberately planned or simply circumstantial, starting from a teacher giving simple instructions, moving toward explaining tasks, answering student questions, clarifying linguistic aspects, giving presentations/lectures, and providing authentic audio resources with didactic applications. Using audio materials in listening comprehension whole-class exercises is an integral part of teaching. These types of exercises are always present and are a fundamental component of good second or
foreign language textbooks. Standard textbook audio exercises ask students to listen to a variety of audio texts and to complete comprehension exercises based on the information heard in the listening materials available on a textbook CD or digitally installed on a computer. However, nowadays, with the technological advancements and usages of the multimedia prevalent in our students’ lives (e.g., computer, iPhone, Internet, digital music, YouTube, and countless applications), language teachers often integrate additional audio-visual materials into their teaching beside their official textbook resources. This has become a prevalent practice in language teaching, and its purposes, generally, are to peak the students’ interest, to provide authentic materials that students can easily access online outside of the classroom, to relate to students’ technology-driven lives, and to provide audio-visual support to other activities completed in class. In practical terms, there has been an evolution toward more authentic resources that do not simply include audio but also visual materials (i.e., still and moving images, writings) through the advances of multimodal media, such as “streaming video, podcasts, and videocasts” (Suarez & Pujolà, 2012).

When one reflects intuitively upon the benefits and drawbacks of using audio-only (AO) materials as opposed to audio-visual (AV) materials, there are essentially two positions. In the first, we know that using AO materials has worked well, historically. Students can focus on simply listening to what is being communicated orally without being distracted by images and writings (still or moving), and without having to manage multiple tasks (e.g., listening, watching, reading) simultaneously. In the second, we see the benefits of using good audio-visual resources, which enhance and add to the listening-only experience, by giving additional information or presenting the same information through multiple dimensions (e.g., listening, watching, reading); thus, enriching the listening experience. As for drawbacks, how do we know that a student actually understands oral speech, or what is actually being said? On one hand, how do we know if the student does not understand the audio materials but perhaps answers questions correctly only thanks to the visual clues provided in the AV rather than the aural communication provided? On the other hand, how do we know that a student fails to understand the materials presented because of the distraction and interference played by the visual cues that are supposed to help but actually deter from the listening tasks? Intuitively, then, AO materials seem to directly assess or evaluate the actual skill being measured (listening comprehension) without the potential distractions and interference offered by images and writings that come into play in AV contexts.

This paper begins with a review of relevant literature and an exploration of various theoretical frameworks, particularly looking at definitions and brain/cognitive theory research. Subsequently, through the experiment proposed in this paper, this study intends to compare AO to AV resources
and examine their effects on listening comprehension in order to investigate the hypothesis that, to build our students’ listening comprehension abilities, AO materials are more functional and helpful than AV materials. Though the proposed study has not been implemented yet, this paper’s objective is to prepare the way for carrying it out in the form described here or with alterations which best fit the chosen language teaching/learning environment. This paper, then, contains the theoretical background, proposal and planning for the suggested study.
Review of Literature and Theoretical Framework

Historical Evolution

Listening comprehension began its journey in the language classroom in the 1970’s, receiving an increase of importance and attention throughout the 1980’s and even more in the 1990’s, and culminating in current trends in which it is regarded as an essential component and one of the four linguistic skills to be taught and learned in a language classroom (Osada, 2004). Suarez and Pujolà (2012) offer an excellent description of the evolution of listening comprehension styles and approaches, stemming from its beginning in the language classroom to current trends and usages.

Before the modern and current advancements in technology, earlier than any kind of recording devices, practicing listening comprehension skills was only possible through the language teacher’s direct speech, called “live listening” (Wilson, 2008, p. 46). Any other kind of differentiated aural experience was only possible by inviting a native speaker or a proficient speaker of the language being taught/learned in a classroom to attempt to recreate a semi-authentic experience. Students, therefore, mostly exclusively heard their language teacher’s voice and pronunciation without any kind of diversity of voices (Suarez & Pujolà, 2012).

With the invention of the cassette tape in the 1970’s through the 1990’s, language teachers were able to provide a variety of voices directly in the classroom. Although most materials were scripted as part of listening texts that were a component of language textbooks, which meant that the recordings were staged and hardly spontaneous or authentic, cassette tapes added the opportunity of hearing other speakers of the language (i.e., other accents) with the addition of sounds and background noises to contextualize and make the listening experience more real. In addition, teachers were able to record materials from the radio directly, such as the news, music, etc.; thus, adding more choices and supplementing the selection of listening materials for their students.

Coincidentally, the invention of the cassette tape supported the concurrent linguistic approach, the Audiolingual method. This approach to language learning and teaching asked students to aurally repeat and memorize language chunks as well as linguistic structures until they could reproduce them without errors. With the introduction of language labs, the cassette tape became a key tool for students because they could listen and repeat materials at their own pace on an individual basis, rather than only through listening to recordings as a whole class and at the same speed, without the chance to stop, rewind and replay what was presented. There was essentially more control and more self-pacing on the part of the students. The subsequent invention of the Compact Disc (CD) added
even more benefits to language learners in that it provided them with a way to go straight to the excerpt needed; thus, saving valuable time in the search and handling of the correct materials both in the classroom and in the language lab (Suarez & Pujolà, 2012).

The introduction of video in the language classroom added a visual element to the listening comprehension approach, which transformed the nature of the methodology used up to that point, and moving from AO to AV approaches. Instead of simply listening to someone speak, now students could see the speakers, watch their facial expressions and gestures, see them interact, see and not just imagine the context, and have a clearer idea of the authentic context presented through the video materials. All of these elements aid students in understanding what is being communicated orally. Suffice it to think of the difference it makes to understand a conversation with a stranger over the phone in a language one is just learning, and having that same conversation, if not in person, at least through a video chat. Sometimes, the visual component makes a world of difference for a language learner. This is also true in terms of student motivation and level of engagement with the materials being presented. Videos also add an extra dimension for teachers to explore with their students: the non-linguistic information that come with videos. This component must not be neglected as it goes hand-in-hand with the audio in a video, and students must learn to analyze and elaborate both in order to get the most out of the experience. Finally, the introduction of DVDs, to substitute videotapes in the language classroom, contributed to finding the correct images in no time (as it did for audio with CDs), both in the language classroom and in the lab, and it added the possibility of including subtitles and captions to the listening and watching experience.

In spite of all the positive effects that the addition of video has had on second language teaching environments, because images can add and complement the information provided by the audio materials, a good language teacher is aware of the fact that sometimes images can overload, distract and confuse students. Cognitive overload can stem from such circumstances if the language teacher has not minimized this effect through properly formulated tasks. It is also important to note that the cognitive load demanded during listening versus writing activities varies, and that while the use of subtitles and captions can enhance understanding, if not used properly, it can really work against it and be, in fact, disadvantageous by having students rely too much on their reading skills rather than their listening comprehension ones (e.g., Bianchi & Ciabattoni, 2008; Vanderplank 1990, 1993) (Suarez & Pujolà, 2012). All in all, Lynch (2010) summarizes this point well by saying, “Here we face a paradox: the availability of non-audio information, which makes it easier for the listener to understand what is said, may at the same time make it more difficult to learn” (p.9).
All things considered, as Celce-Murcia (1995) affirms, research conducted over the years alongside the historical evolution of listening comprehension has confirmed that gaining listening comprehension skills, particularly because it happens as the message is released, is “complex, dynamic, and fragile,” (p. 366).

Definitions

What is listening comprehension in general?

Customarily, listening and reading comprehension were and still are considered receptive or passive linguistic skills. Speaking and writing are considered productive or active linguistic skills. This is because in order to listen (aural language) and read (written language), students do not produce language; however, students produce language when speaking (oral language) or writing (written language). Listening comprehension has been, to a point, thought of as a skill that will develop on its own, and “an ability that would develop without assistance” (Osada, 2004, p. 53). Mendelsohn (1984) goes as far as to declare that, in the era of the Audiolingual method, students would develop their listening comprehension skills through osmosis. Mere exposure to the language, then, was once thought to suffice. However, listening “is now considered as an active skill that involves many processes” (Osada, 2004, p. 55). It has also been described as a “highly complex problem-solving activity” which can then be divided into separate sub-skills (Byrnes, 1984, p. 318). Specifically, listening comprehension takes ideas from research in “psycholinguistics, semantics, pragmatics, discourse analysis, and cognitive science” (Richards, 1985, p. 189).

Listening comprehension in language classrooms can be differentiated into reciprocal (or two-way) or non-reciprocal (or one-way) listening. In the first type, the listening is set up in such a way that listeners and speakers can trade roles; in other words, the listeners also speak at some point, thus combining listening and speaking skills (receptive and productive linguistic skills) into a more realistic and authentic manner as one would encounter outside the classroom in an English speaking environment. In the second type of listening, the listeners simply listen, for example, to a radio program or the news with no need to respond through speaking. Language teachers should, of course, move away from one-way listening and strive to incorporate reciprocal, realistic listening comprehension activities in their language lessons. Furthermore, listening comprehension involves more than merely language. In fact, during listening comprehension activities, aside from hearing what is being said and understanding its linguistic meaning, students must also learn to focus, interpret what is being said based on background knowledge, and discern if background noises add
to the context of the experience or detract from it (Anderson & Lynch, 1988). In fact, what makes listening complex is that there are several foundations at play when we listen: phonetics, phonology, prosody, lexicon, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. These foundations need to be incorporated together in order to enable second- or foreign-language listeners to comprehend spoken messages (Osada, 2004).

What is audio-only (AO) listening comprehension?

Audio-only listening comprehension includes any type of listening exercises that involve listening to spoken words without the addition of other non-verbal cues, such as visual aids (e.g., pictures, writing, moving images). AO listening comprehension includes (but is not limited to) listening to a teacher, listening to a recording related to a textbook, listening to an audio file, a song, news broadcasts, etc.

What is audio-visual (AV) listening comprehension?

The range of possibilities involved in audio-visual listening comprehension is so vast that it is crucial for the individual teacher to assess whether all the components involved are fitting for the class and the students being taught. AV listening comprehension includes any type of listening exercises that add a visual component to the spoken words in order to supplement the listening comprehension experience. Images can be pictorial or written in form, they can be still or moving, and they can enrich or detract from the spoken words. Furthermore, visual aids can underline and explain what is being said, so that students can have more than one mode to receive the same or closely similar information. Visuals can also add new information to what is being said. A third possibility is that non-verbal communication can simply attract the learner’s attention without adding or underlining information.

Difficulties related to listening comprehension

Ur (1984) lists a series of potential issues that our students might find when involved in listening comprehension exercises. The first is actually hearing the sounds, or phonemes, that English makes and that the students’ native language may not have at all or may use differently. For example, students of Italian often struggle with the “th” sounds that do not exist in Italian and may even
confuse them with an “s” or an “f” sound. Long and short vowels are also challenging to discern for our students, as are certain consonant clusters or silent letters. Another difficulty related to listening comprehension is interpreting intonation and stress, which may interfere with understanding the message accurately. Next, we must take into consideration the struggles in processing redundancy and extra noise in English, which may cause words or parts of words to be drowned by interference. Because of the typical need for language students to feel the need to understand every word being uttered, students may find this problem particularly challenging. Predicting can also be problematic for language learners, as they may not yet be familiar with the language enough to know how a sentence might end or what the meaning of another might entail for what will likely be uttered next. An additional demand on the part of the language learner is understanding colloquial vocabulary, both in terms of knowing the colloquial lexis and in being familiar with colloquial collocations. This category also includes pronunciation differences, merely considering formal versus informal pronunciation, but also taking into consideration regional styles and accents, which may appear to be wrong to a non-proficient speaker of the language. Fatigue, or simply running out of energy, is another obstacle that language learners face, especially in contexts in which their attention needs to be fully employed for a long period of time. Finally, visual and aural environmental clues are a difficulty strictly related to AV listening contexts, in which the listener has to process visual in addition to aural cues. This is where the visuals could actually impede comprehension if the listener is distracted by them (and misses aural cues) or if the listener is simply overwhelmed cognitively by the large amount of processing he is required to do. These are some of the core difficulties that students may encounter when exposed to listening comprehension activities, and which teachers need to take into consideration.

**Measuring listening comprehension**

Speech can be measured in two ways: through intelligibility and through comprehension. Intelligibility is the ability to understand single words, and comprehension is the ability to understand the message that words make together (Barron, 2004). Unfortunately, teachers cannot directly access what is happening inside students’ brains in terms of the listening process, the problems they face, or the skills they put into practice. In order to obtain evidence that students have listened successfully, teachers can merely observe their responses to listening comprehension experiences, such as written, oral, or non-verbal responses. Additionally, teachers can attempt to assess students’ understanding by observing learners tasks that demonstrate their comprehension of specific characteristics. This is best accomplished by setting up tasks in three specific points in the
listening exercise: the input (what the speaker says), the listening process (what the listener does with what he/she hears), and the output (how the listener responds). Teachers can facilitate the experience by ensuring that the environment is adequate for a listening comprehension activity (e.g., satisfactory volume, no background noises). This can ease the listening process, although it is similarly important to ensure that the listening experience is as realistic and authentic as possible (Anderson & Lynch, 1988).

**Cognitive theories and definitions**

In the context of this study, which investigates AO and VO listening comprehension approaches, when we think of cognitive theories in listening comprehension contexts, the main questions to address are: how does our brain perceive and process auditory information, how does it store it, and how does it retrieve and remember it? Furthermore, what are the differences within the cognitive processes for auditory information and visual information? Following is a discussion of differing definitions and theoretical frameworks.

**Memory**

Stemming from the 1960’s, we have known that our memory can be separated into long-term memory (LTM) and short-term memory (STM), and that there are differences in how visual and auditory information is processed in our brain (Barron, 2004). Baddeley (1998) suggests a memory structure for both visual and auditory information divided into three types: echoic, short-term, and long-term memory.

Echoic memory

Echoic memory represents the echo a sound makes, it can extend for mere milliseconds, and it can be compared to the persistence of vision in iconic (or visual) memory. As echoic memory is considered a segment of perception and is also considered passive, this kind of information disappears quickly or is replaced by new information. Furthermore, the capacity of information storage of echoic memory is not quantifiable because there are too many variables at play, such as “the physical similarity of items, the difficulty of discrimination, temporal relations, and the subject’s prior knowledge related to the stimuli” (Barron, 2004, p. 956).
Short-term memory (STM)

Short-term memory, or working memory, is considered active and very limited in capacity and duration (Barron, 2004). Unlike echoic memory, some STM information is processed and stored through the effect of selective and divided attention. Selective attention is “the ability to focus on or attend to one particular sound or voice” (Barron, 2004, p. 956), such as a single conversation heard in a crowded place, like a train station. This does not mean that other conversations, noises and sounds do not receive any attention. In fact, researchers (e.g., Kahneman, 1973) propose the concept of resource allocation, one in which STM can be directed to different senses and information depending on “the task, the stimulus and its relevance” (Barron, 2004, p. 956). They further propose a similar concept to resource allocation called divided or split attention. Divided attention is the ability “to attend to several simultaneously active input channels or messages, responding to each as needed” (Hawkins & Presson, 1986, p. 21). Of course, depending on the processing load and other elements, divided attention can be counterproductive as it may impede or lower performance; thus, undertaking multiple tasks simultaneously may result in poor task completion, even if attention can switch from one task to another rather quickly (Olson, 1989). Although the belief that attention is absolutely indivisible is now surpassed, there is still the idea that processing things in parallel can work only to a certain point; then, processing becomes sequential.

Research findings in STM support the notion that audio and visual modalities do not share a common processor; rather, they are assigned different resources (Basil, 1992). This is because audio information seems to be recalled with greater frequency when compared to visual information (Gelder & Vroomen, 1997; Penney, 1975). Penney (1989) theorizes that audio and visual information processing have different properties and capabilities. For the audio modality, she defines three properties (p. 415):

1. There is a large capacity for storing sensory information. The sensory information persists for periods of up to a minute in the absence of subsequent auditory information.
2. The echo does not decay; rather, it is highly susceptible to interference from subsequent auditory input.
3. There is an automatic generation and maintenance of the acoustic code.

Speech, then, is encoded in acoustic and phonological codes, sounds are encoded only in an auditory code, and visuals are encoded in visual and phonological codes. The acoustic code is considered richer and more durable compared to the visual code.
Other research supports the notion of distinct channels for auditory and visual processes. For example, Gelder and Vroomen (1997) underline the automaticity of audio in STM as opposed to the recoding that visuals have to undertake to get through the phonological loop. Paivio (1986) and Thompson and Paivio (1994) developed a dual-coding theory that found that memory can be encoded in verbal and non-verbal segments. Mayer (2001) proposes a model which illustrates a sensory-modalities approach that combines sensory input (audio and visual) to presentation mode (verbal and non-verbal) (Barron, 2004).

Long-term Memory (LTM)

Long-term memory (LTM) is “information that is stored sufficiently durably to be accessible over a period of anything more than a few seconds” (Baddeley, 1999, p. 16). LTM is considered limitless and is made up of “hierarchically organized schemas,” which enable us to “store learned information in long’term memory” and to “reduce the burden on working memory” (Barron, 2004, p. 961). Research in this area of memory does not always see eye to eye regarding LTM capacity, duration, how the information is processed, coded and stored, and whether or not audio and visual channels are independent. It is also difficult to understand if audio information is stored just as sound or also as meaning, and if audio information is more distinctive than visual information. There is also disagreement about whether audio or visual information has higher recall rates (Penney, 1989).

Results, all in all, often differ and sometimes contradict themselves, especially regarding LTM investigations. However, studies have found that in STM contexts, auditory information is recalled at higher rates as compared to visual information. These findings support the theory that audio and visual information are processed not only differently from but also likely independently of one another (Barron, 2004). In summary, Estes (1989) states, “Whether information is presented via films, lectures, readings, or other kinds of experiences, the process of adding the information to the stock of knowledge and skill in the mind of the student in usable form is complex and subject to many uncertainties” (p. 3).

Multi-Channel Theories

Research that examines audio usually studies it in a multi-channel context in which more than one sense is involved, typically the auditory and the visual channels. Multi-channel theory research
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relies on five main multi-channel communication theories, which sometimes contradict each other or overlap: single-channel processing theory, cue summation theory, limited-capacity information processing, dual-coding theory, and cognitive load theory.

Single-channel processing theory

“There is only one channel to higher centers of the brain; therefore, dual-channel transmission can be equal to, but not greater than, the single-channel processing. In fact, if both stimuli arrive at the same time, information jamming may occur and cause the dual-channel effectiveness to be less than that of either of the single channels” (Barron, 2004, p. 958). In other words, when redundant information from two different channels reaches the brain, all information can be processed only if it reaches the brain slowly. If it reaches the brain quickly, information will be lost. Just because two channels are transmitting similar information simultaneously, the resulting retention does not automatically get added between the two channels. Therefore, two-channel transmission, such as AV transmission, does not equal greater amounts of information retained. In fact, it is more the case that one channel alone transmitting the information, such as the AO channel, will result in just as much if not better retention. What determines the amount of information retained, then, is not how many sensory channels are being used to transmit the information; rather, information retention is determined inside the brain by “events at the highest levels of the nervous system” (Barron, 2004, p. 959).

Cue summation theory

“Dual-channel presentations result in more learning than single-channel presentations because the number of stimuli or cues is increased” (Barron, 2004, p. 958). “This theory suggests that when pictures are added to the message, the number of cues relevant to the message increases” (Lang, 1995, p. 88). Out of the five theories, cue summation theory is the one which helps explain when AV listening comprehension is helped or hindered by the non-verbal cues added to the audio. On the one hand, it illustrates that when images (but not print) are closely connected to the words being spoken, the information provided is essentially repetitive and combined (hence the name, ”cue summation”) between the two channels. Therefore, results are superior when two channels are employed, and neither channel used on its own is better than the other. On the other hand, when the information provided in one channel presents new or unrelated information that is not presented in the other, there is interference instead of summation. Therefore, results are inferior, particularly in terms of less information being gained when compared to what would be gained if only one channel were employed instead of two, especially if the information presented through the two channels is
unrelated. This distinction is significant in that it clarifies why there is a fine line between AV materials that help listening comprehension and those that hinder it. It is the teacher’s responsibility to preview materials and ascertain that the contents are suitable, even in terms of channels of communication, and especially when employing more than one channel simultaneously, such as in AV listening contexts.

Limited-capacity information processing

“If the combined amount of information of two single channels exceeds the upper limit of the central nervous system capacity, then interference may occur, causing equal or less gain to take place. If combined stimuli are less than the capacity, however, then the dual-channel presentation is more efficient and effective (Barron, 2004, p. 958)” A study by Hsia (1968) found that “both communication efficiency and dependability were higher in the AV channel than in the A and V channels alone” (p. 342). However, once again, as for cue summation theory, Hsia points out that “the total information provided by a stimulus or a message with a number of dimensions cannot be equal to but is always less than the sum of the information in each dimension” (p. 63).

Dual-coding theory

“Information is processed in either a verbal or a nonverbal form. By coding semantically connected information in both formats, recall and recognition can be enhanced because information from one code acts as a retrieval cue for information in the other mental store” (Barron, 2004, p. 958). Kearsley (2001) agrees by stating, “Recall/recognition is enhanced by presenting information in both visual and verbal form” (p. 1). The key to successful dual coding, then, is the semantic overlap, redundancy, or cross-connection of information in both the audio and the visual channels. The opposite is also true: disconnected, non-repetitive information “increases the processing requirements of the task and may hinder encoding” (Hannafin & Hooper, 1993, p. 196). It is important to note that there is a difference between redundant information and identical information. In fact, dual coding does not work and is unsuccessful when information is completely identical, and this kind of presentation (i.e., identical information in spoken and written texts) should not be used.

Cognitive load theory

“Working memory is limited; therefore, designers should seek to structure the learning materials to minimize the requirements on STM (by using two modalities, reducing the complexity, organizing
the materials, etc.)” (Barron, 2004, p. 958). There are two types of cognitive loads: intrinsic and extraneous cognitive load. The first refers to the complexity of the task itself. For example, in learning all the terms in human anatomy, the intrinsic cognitive load would be high. The second pertains to the way the instruction is delivered. For example, instruction, which contains unnecessary information, will lead to a high and irrelevant cognitive load. Research in the area of cognitive load theory found that STM can be augmented and its capacity increased by simply presenting information in multi-channel form, such as audio and visual (for example, AV listening comprehension contexts). In turn, augmenting STM capacity means that there is more space to process a larger amount of information (Andres & Petersen, 2001/2002; Goolkasian, 2000; Kalyuga et al., 1999; Mousivi, Low, & Sweller, 1995). Mousivi, et al. (1995) suggest that when students are learning through multi-channel sources of information, such as AV contexts, providing some of the information in auditory form rather than written form would increase cognitive resources. This idea is confirmed also my Kalyuga et al. (1999), who also add that “textual materials should not be presented in both auditory and written form” and if there is no choice in the matter, teachers should “search for diagrammatic referents” which use “appropriate markers or guides such as colour-coding” (p. 369). Tindall-Ford, Chandler, and Sweller (1997) confirm the notion of using audio when information is dense because “mental integration may be easier” (p. 285). They also add that the difficulty (e.g., length) of the AV task determines whether or not the activity is beneficial. Furthermore, AV instruction can be completely unproductive if the information conveyed orally is too complex or demanding. Finally, these researchers say that the AV instructional context may fail in situations in which “the audio component is unnecessary or redundant for understanding” (p. 284).

Lang (1995) points out that the contradictions found in multi-channel research stem from four main reasons: 1) the lack of theoretical perspective about AV “conceptualization and operationalization” (p. 88); 2) the discrepancy among definitions of the key concept of redundancy (e.g., two channels rather than one, same exact content, or shared semantic meaning); 3) the discrepancy among operational definitions of the key concept of redundancy (e.g., words spoken out loud, words flashed visually, simultaneous AV repetitions); 4) the discrepancy of operational definitions of the key concept of memory (e.g., recognition, cued recall, free recall). Based on her theoretical perspective, Lang draws the conclusions that: 1) multiple-channel AV contexts in which the information is redundant are better than single-channel AV contexts at the encoding, storage and retrieval levels of information processing; 2) visual information seems to be superior to audio information in recognition and recall processes; therefore, AV redundancy does not significantly affect memory of visual information, but it does affect audio information when AV redundancy
fails; 3) visual stimuli, such as pictures, have the biggest effect on recall; 4) “visual processing may require less capacity than audio processing”; and 5) audio memory, rather than visual memory, is affected negatively in larger measure by a lack of AV redundancy (p. 111).

**Representative studies in AO and AV listening comprehension**

To underline the disparity of findings in the area of AO and AV listening comprehension exercises set out in language teaching contexts, this section summarizes a few representative studies. An investigation by Bal-Gezegen (2014) of the use of video versus audio for teaching specific fixed expressions (i.e., vocabulary) at a Turkish university, conducted in a way that was very similar to the study proposed in this paper, found that students who watched the video did better overall in the listening comprehension exercises than the group of students who only listened to the audio component of the same video. Students in the AV group were also more motivated and positive about the experience, as opposed to students in the AO group who were negative and complained about the difficulties of the tasks.

In spite of this, Bal-Gezegen points out that earlier studies (e.g., Baltova, 1994; Felhman, 1996; Ndong-Ekouaga, 2002; Secules et al., 1992) found the exact opposite results, warning against the making of broad generalization, and reminding teachers of the importance of “context, participants and the video type used in the study” (p. 455). In further contrast with Bal-Gezegen (2014) above, a study by Başal et al. (2015) found that when testing two groups of students with AO or AV materials, the first group scored statistically higher than the second, even though the authors warned against factors that may have influenced the results, such as attitude, background knowledge on the subject matter, note-taking skills, and physical factors.

A final example that both proves and disproves the findings described in this section so far is a study by Rahmatian (2011). In this experiment, Rahmatian discovered that adult language learners found benefits and drawbacks from AV materials as compared to AO materials. In fact, the researcher states that video is usually helpful in that it motivates students and keeps their attention for a longer period of time as opposed to audio materials. However, video is only helpful when it underlines what is being said in words, and if it does not become too distracting for the listeners; otherwise, it becomes an obstacle to understanding the material being presented. In this case, AO would then be more beneficial.
All things considered, it is clear that the differences in conceptual and operational definitions or key terms, such as redundancy and memory, the differences in philosophical and theoretical perspectives, and the differences in research designs, all have an impact on research results. The presence of so many variables, such as the level of redundancy, the AV combinations, the complexities and length of information presented, the presence and level of interference, schema, generative learning, and last but not least, the characteristics of the target audience, will all influence results. It is not surprising, then, that there may be confusion and contradictions in the findings pertaining to AO and AV listening comprehension research. This project aims at establishing more evidence that might clarify some of these inconsistencies.

Didactic implications

Berne (1998) examined the literature related to second language listening comprehension, including empirical research (e.g., Flowerdew, 1994; Oxford, 1993; Rubin, 1994), and theoretical and pedagogical research (e.g., Anderson & Lynch, 1988; Mendelsohn & Rubin, 1995; Rixon, 1986; Rost, 1990, 1991; Underwood, 1989; Ur, 1984). Osada (2004) reports on Berne’s findings through a list of elements found by Bern related to second and foreign language listening comprehension that have direct didactic implications for classroom teaching (pp. 169-170):

1. Familiarity with passage content facilitates L2 listening comprehension.
2. Lower-proficiency L2 listeners attend to phonological or semantic cues, whereas higher-proficiency L2 listeners attend to semantic cues.
3. The effectiveness of different types of speech modifications or visual aids varies according to the degree of L2 listening proficiency.
4. Repetition of passages should be encouraged as it appears to facilitate L2 listening comprehension more than other types of modifications.
5. The use of prelistening activities, particularly those that provide short synopses of the listening passage or allow listeners to preview the comprehension questions, facilitate L2 listening comprehension.
6. The use of videotape, as opposed to audiotape, as a means of presenting listening passages facilitates L2 listening comprehension, especially with regard to attitudinal and attentional factors.
7. The use of authentic, as opposed to pedagogical, listening passages leads to greater improvement in L2 listening comprehension performance.
8. Training in the use of listening strategies facilitates L2 listening comprehension and L2 learners can and should be taught how to use listening strategies.

9. Due to the complex nature of listening comprehension, L2 listening practice should encompass a wide range of situations where listening is required as well as different types of listening, different types of listening passages, different modes of presentation (e.g., live, videotape, audiotape), and different types of activities or tasks.

To sum up, there is a series of elements that need to be carefully taken into consideration when planning to implement listening comprehension exercises in order to build and strengthen students’ listening skills during foreign or second language lessons. If the research discussed above and in previous sections is not heeded, students will likely struggle and frustration levels may run high, resulting in poor outcomes and in a skewed view on what students could actually do if planning had been carried out properly and mindfully. Especially in cases of AO and AV listening comprehension materials, teachers must understand both benefits and drawbacks of both approaches, and they must plan following research observations in order to plan carefully for best results. The actual students being taught must also always be placed in the center of this entire process.
Elaborated project

Project description

The project described below was originally designed for implementation in first-year English as a foreign language courses at the Scuola Cantonale di Commercio (SCC) in Bellinzona, Switzerland. Because of particular circumstances, the project was piloted early in the school year and in its early stages of design in three first-year classes. However, the specific AV resources chosen for this experiment proved to be too advanced for 10th grade students during their first semester of English and should be carried out in higher-level courses, such as toward the end of the school year in 10th grade 11th grade or at higher levels, depending on the students’ proficiency levels. For this, and because of other reasons, in accordance with the requirements set forth for the completion of the certification by the department, and with direct permission from Paolo Jacomelli, this project’s supervisor and mentor, the project has not been carried out in its entirety; however, it is fully described below. This means that the project does not include a discussion of actual data, even though it does explicate how to analyze it once gathered. It also means that the project presents a “how-to” description rather than a recount of a study that has been carried out. Therefore, the methodology section is set in the future tense as is customarily done when writing a reflection on a didactic itinerary for a research experiment that will be carried out in the future. All in all, the experiment is fully planned and ready to be applied. Any teacher who wishes to experiment the uses of AO and AV listening comprehension designs to research their effects and ensuing results on their students are welcome to adopt and adapt this project in part or in its entirety. Paolo Jacomelli, the aforementioned professor, who is a renowned English teacher at the Scuole Medie Superiori in Ticino, and the professor in charge of the English language teaching workshop at the Dipartimento di Formazione e Apprendimento for the Diploma di insegnamento per le scuole di maturità svizzere, for which this project has been written in partial fulfillment of the teacher certification program, has already indicated that he would like to implement and test this project during the next school year, 2018/2019.

Place

This project is designed for English as a foreign language courses taught at a Scuola Media Superiore in Ticino, Switzerland. Specifically, the intended target audience for the implementation of this particular project is end-of-first year or second-year classes at the Scuola Cantonale di
Commercio in Bellinzona. However, with alterations in content, the study is easily replicable in all other high schools and at lower- or higher-level courses.

Participants

The intended and ideal target participants for this project are, then, students of English enrolled in 10th/11th grade (and above) classes in Ticino high schools, male and female, between approximately 15 and 20 years of age. The intended project is designed ideally for comparisons between two classes, in order to facilitate the implementation of the project design. However, one class could be used exclusively if the teacher: 1) finds a way to separate the class in two, so that the same materials can be used without repetitions and without overlap (i.e., students should not hear the listening materials when not taking direct part in the study), or 2) if the AO and AV materials are varied to avoid repetitions, otherwise results would be invalidated.

Consent

As far as I know, no consent is needed for this type of study, even if students are minors, because there is no filming of students and all assessments and questionnaires are kept anonymous.

Research questions

After exposing at least two groups of students to two versions of a listening comprehension activity, one AO and one AV, one per group of students, the teacher/researcher will examine the following research questions in order to draw implications and conclusions on the hypothesis that AO materials are more functional and helpful than AV materials overall in building students’ listening comprehension abilities and how:

1. Which of the two types of listening comprehension approaches applied in this study, AO or AV, leads to the greatest comprehension of the spoken words presented in the activity?
2. Which of the two types of listening comprehension approaches applied in this study, AO or AV, do students find most or least enjoyable in terms of interference and engagement?
Listening comprehension: Audio-only vs. audio-visual approaches

**Instruments**

The instruments used in this study consist of the following components:

1. An AV listening comprehension exercise, “Rowan Atkinson Live – Elementary dating,” used as AO material for one group and as AV material for the other (see transcript in Appendix A)
2. A handout, “Dating Tips for Men,” with listening comprehension questions based on the materials presented (see Appendix B). Both groups will receive the same handout with the same questions.
3. A master key with the answers to the “Dating Tips for Men” handout (see Appendix C).
4. A student survey, “Listening Comprehension – Student Survey,” given to all students after the listening comprehension activity (see Appendix D).

**Methodology**

This is a study that will use qualitative and quantitative elements in order to seek answers to the two research questions above.

1. The teacher will already have introduced the topic of dating. The class will already have talked and discussed the topic at length, taking into consideration different cultural points of view (for example, similarities and differences in dating in Ticino and in the United States. As a mean of introducing the AO and/or AV material, the instructor will have already introduced key terms that will be encountered in the listening.
2. The teacher will choose two groups of students and create Group A and Group B. The easiest way is to use two different classes enrolled in the same year of study (e.g., 11th grade). In this case, one class would be Group A and the other Group B. However, the teacher could choose to occupy half of one class with an alternative activity that would require them leave the classroom while the group that stays listens, and then the groups could switch activities. It is important that if this study is carried out by dividing one class into two groups, the group who is not engaged in the activity does not hear or listen to the AO or AV materials being played for the other group, otherwise results will be compromised, and the entire study would lose validity, reliability, and it would be ineffective.
3. The teacher will distribute the listening comprehension handout containing one comprehension questions and fill-in-the-blanks exercise. Students will preview the questions
by reading them before the AO or AV material starts playing. They can ask for clarifications as long as they do not give away answers.

4. The teacher will use one listening comprehension video and apply it in two different ways with the two groups of students:
   a. Students in Group A will listen to the material presented without seeing any visual support (AO listening comprehension). Students will listen twice.
   b. Students in Group B will listen to the material presented with visual support (AV listening comprehension). Students will listen and watch twice.

5. The students will complete specific listening comprehension tasks during and immediately after the material is presented. Based on the materials presented, students will:
   a. Take notes (optional);
   b. Write short answers to comprehension questions;

6. The teacher will conduct an informal, qualitative assessment of perceived student engagement with the activities (AO and AV) during the listening comprehension activity to gauge student involvement, stress levels, etc.

7. The students will fill out a survey immediately after the completion of the listening activity task.

8. The teacher will assess the students’ completion and correctness of the listening comprehension activity tasks through the evaluation of the completed handout.

9. The teacher will gain insight into the students’ opinions about the listening comprehension activity through the evaluation of the completed survey.

10. The teacher will draw implications and conclusions about the research questions based on the data collected.

11. OPTIONAL EXPANSION: The teacher could choose to repeat the experiment with different listening materials and by reversing the groups’ versions. For example, if Group A listened to the material presented without seeing any visual support (AO listening comprehension), and if Group B listened to the material presented with visual support (AV listening comprehension), the groups would switch listening comprehension activity types. This would enable students to experience both types of listening comprehension activities (albeit with different listening materials) and to express their opinion on which type they enjoyed best through the survey. Questions would be added to the survey, in this case, to ask
students about their preferences and opinions comparing the two types of listening comprehension activities. The teacher would then cross-examine the listening comprehension task results for the same group of students carrying out both types of listening comprehension activities (AO and AV) and take into consideration their preferences and opinions as expressed through the surveys.

**Analysis**

The teacher will:

1. Observe student engagement through qualitative observations of the students individually and as a class group to make inferences about listening-comprehension activity type and perceived student engagement and stress/frustration levels.
2. Observe student completion of tasks informally and correct all handout activities to assess accuracy of the learning tasks set by the teacher.
3. Read all completed student surveys to discover if students enjoyed the listening-comprehension activities, which one they preferred (if they tried both, as in the Optional expansion option), and to find out why from their own words.
4. Draw implications and conclusions based on the findings in 1-3 above. For example, the teacher will look for student engagement, for exercise completion results across the two activity types, and for correlations or relationships between data on student surveys and exercise completion results.
5. OPTIONAL EXPANSION: In case of completion of the optional expansion described in Methodology (see 11 above), the teacher will also compare results and preferences between the two types of listening comprehension activities for each group of students. Therefore, quantitative and qualitative data will also be correlated within each group of students (Group A and Group B) for the two types of listening comprehension activities.

**Expected findings and results**

The first expected finding of this study is that students will prefer the AV version of the listening comprehension exercise for entertainment and motivation reasons, rather than the AO version. Mr. Bean is a well-known entertainer and actor who primarily performs in comical contexts. For this reason, students will likely already be familiar with him and his work, thus being automatically absorbed in the images and the video they are watching. Conversely, the students in the AO experiment, who will also be familiar with Mr. Bean, may exhibit frustration simply because they
would like to see the images but are not allowed to see them. They will also hear laughter from the audience in the video caused by images they cannot see. This is an expected result. However, this particular video was deliberately chosen with the specific purpose of discovering if, even with this added frustration, the AO group of students can still outperform the AV group in the listening comprehension tasks presented in Appendix B.

Related to the first finding, the AO group may find some frustration in the instances in which the spoken words rely on the images presented in the video that they cannot see. For example, there are three instances in which the following words are uttered: 1) “This is right. - This is wrong;” 2) “This is good. This is better. This is starting to be misguided;” and 3) “This is right, and this is, I think you'll agree, disastrous” (see Appendix A). The speaker or narrator is relying here on the actor who is performing what the words may imply. However, the AO students will not see the images and cannot know what the words mean. In fact, they can only imagine their meanings. It is important to know that the materials that were chosen for this exercise were selected specifically for the overacting nature of the images. As was mentioned above, Mr. Bean is well known for overacting, thus emphasizing and showing Rowan Atkinson’s (the narrator’s) spoken words. Again, the design behind this choice is to create an exaggerated context, which may emphasize a sharper contrast between AO and AV results.

A final expectation, and what drives the initial hypothesis of this study is that, because of the very entertaining nature of the AV materials chosen for this experiment, students viewing the video will be distracted by the images and will perform worse than the other group on the listening comprehension exercise (Appendix B). On one hand, students in the AV group may perhaps gain a greater overall understanding of the content of the material presented due to the images, which add a dimension to the listening experience. On the other hand, the images may act as interference in understanding the actual spoken words and impede, at least partially, the completion of the expected tasks.
Conclusions

The purpose of this project was to investigate the use of AO and AV listening comprehension material in English language courses in the Scuole Medie Superiori in Ticino to ascertain the hypothesis that the first methodology leads to greater results in terms of listening comprehension skills outcomes and perceptions. Through the examination of the literature regarding the different definitions and theoretical frameworks taken into consideration when conducting studies comparing AO to AV listening comprehension materials, particularly in terms of cognitive theory, it is clear to see why there are discrepancies and conflicting results in the data. The proposed study described in this paper attempts to be an added voice to the existing body of research, looking to find answers to the hypothesis that AO materials are more functional and helpful than AV materials. Although the question remains open-ended for now, and I suspect it will be for a long time still, what we know for sure is that language teachers have the responsibility of planning AO and AV activities carefully, with their students in mind, and taking into consideration a series of known characteristics and didactic implications related to listening comprehension carried out in the language classroom. Further research needs to be conducted to continue to investigate the elements that characterize AO and AV listening comprehension resources and to learn how to implement the two approaches in language teaching in ways that add value to the experience and are tailored to the learning goals set by the teachers. Ultimately, a combination of AO and AV listening comprehension activities are the expected outcome of such research as the ideal way to implement listening comprehension materials in the language classroom.
References


Listening comprehension: Audio-only vs. audio-visual approaches


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Appendices

Appendix A: Transcript

Rowan Atkinson's Elementary Dating Script

(Taken from: http://www.fun-with-english.co.uk/2010/11/elementary-courting-for-men.html)

Good evening and welcome to the Boston University Huntingdon theatre, for this the second part of our course in elementary courting for men. May I say how pleased I am with tonight's turnout, some 800 people, which is very gratifying.

Tonight we look at the first date. Obviously taking out a girl for the first time is a very complex issue.

The first crucial step is, having arranged to pick up your date, not to look like a complete idiot when she first opens the door. Best to look as if your attention has been momentarily distracted. But when you do notice her it is vital to say how pretty she is looking straight away, but don't overdo it.

If at this point you are introduced to her parents, attitude is all important: You can be too casual. You can be too keen.

When you have said goodbye to the parents, again don't overdo it, lead her to your car and remember to open the door.

Once in the car there are various ways of driving: If you drive like this, you might lose her respect. If you drive like this, you should have taken a taxi.

Before long you'll arrive at the restaurant. Get out of the car, and escort her to your table. Then tuck her into her seat - yourself, and attract the waiter's attention.

Selecting from the wine list is important, complete ignorance is not good. When the bottle arrives, there's much to be made in the tasting of it, but don't be too professional.
With eating, again, moderation is the order of the day: Don't eat too fast. - But don't eat too slowly.

Next is receiving the bill. This is a very important moment, you must be sure not to lose your cool: This is right. - This is wrong.

The girl may of course offer to pay herself, in which case you should refuse, for a while.

Next stop is a fashionable discotheque. Once inside you might look slightly strange if you try and talk over the music, so just stand casually and look sexy.

This is good. This is better. This is starting to be misguided.

After stance, dance technique is most important. Most people don't know how to dance and so do too much. Other people do too little. Some people dance as if there's something up their bottom. And other people dance as if there's something coming out of their bottom.

When all's said and done it's best probably not to dance at all A well-mimed sporting injury is always useful and a good excuse for leaving the discotheque.

If you don't utterly foul it up, twenty minutes later you should be back at at your place.

It's important to relax and make your guest feel at home. She will probably feel as nervous as you do and there's no need to make any extra special effort

Then putting on the music, we can't help you with the choice of CD, even though no matter what the circumstances, Donny and Marie Osmond's greatest hits would be a mistake.

At all costs avoid the temptation to brag about your stereo.

Now comes the moment you've been waiting for, the seduction. This is the subject of next week's lecture. However, as a rough guide: This is right, and this is, I think you'll agree, disastrous.
Appendix B: Listening comprehension exercise handout

Dating Tips for Men

Listen to Rowan Atkinson talk about elementary courting (dating) tips for men. Answer the questions and fill in the blanks below as you listen.

1. Picking up your date.

   a) What should you *not* look like when she opens the door? ___________.
   b) A better way would be to look like your attention has been momentarily ___________.
   c) What should you tell her straight away? ________________.
   d) But don’t ________________________.

2. Meeting her parents:

   a) Attitude is important: you can be too __________ or too __________.

3. Driving:

   a) Remember to ________________________ for her.
   b) How might you lose her respect? If you drive ________________.
   c) Why should you take a taxi? If you drive ________________.

4. At the restaurant:

   a) Get out of the car and ________________________ her to your table.
   b) Attract the waiter’s ________________________.
   c) What is not good when selecting a wine? ________________.
   d) When tasting the wine, don’t be too ________________________.
e) What is the order of the day when eating? Don’t eat too ____________ or too ____________.
f) When receiving the bill, don’t lose your ________________.
g) If the girl offers to pay herself, you should ____________________.

5. At the disco:

a) You might look slightly ________________ if you try to ____________________ the music.
b) What should you do? Stand ____________ and look ____________.
c) People who don’t know how to dance, do ____________________ or do ____________________.
d) When in doubt, it’s better not to ____________________.

6. Back home:

a) There is no need to ____________________.
b) Avoid the temptation to ____________ about your ____________.
c) On the topic of seduction, what is right? ____________________.
Appendix C: Listening comprehension exercise answer key

Dating Tips for Men (Answer Key)

Listen to Rowan Atkinson talk about elementary courting (dating) tips for men. Answer the questions and fill in the blanks below as you listen.

1. **Picking up your date.**

   a) What should you *not* look like when she opens the door? *(A complete idiot.)*
   b) A better way would be to look like your attention has been momentarily … *(distracted).*
   c) What should you tell her straight away? *(That she is pretty.)*
   d) But don’t … *(overdo it).*

2. **Meeting her parents:**

   a) Attitude is important: you can be too … *(casual)* or too … *(keen).*

3. **Driving:**

   a) Remember to … *(open the door)* for her.
   b) How might you lose her respect? If you drive … *(too fast).*
   c) Why should you take a taxi? If you drive … *(too slowly).*

4. **At the restaurant:**

   a) Get out of the car and … *(escort)* her to your table.
   b) Attract the waiter’s … *(attention).*
   c) What is not good when selecting a wine? *(Complete ignorance.)*
   d) When tasting the wine, don’t be too … *(professional).*
   e) What is the order of the day when eating? Don’t eat too … *(fast)* or too … *(slowly).*
f) When receiving the bill, don’t lose your … *(cool).*

g) If the girl offers to pay herself, you should … *(refuse for a while).*

5. **At the disco:**

a) You might look slightly … *(strange)* if you try to … *(talk over)* the music.

b) What should you do? Stand … *(casually)* and look … *(sexy).*

c) People who don’t know how to dance, do … *(too much)* or do … *(too little).*

d) When in doubt, it’s better not to … *(dance at all).*

6. **Back home:**

a) There is no need to … *(make any extra special effort).*

b) Avoid the temptation to … *(brag)* about your … *(stereo).*

c) On the topic of seduction, what is right? *(Yawning and stretching.)*
Listening comprehension: Audio-only vs. audio-visual approaches

Appendix D: Student survey

Listening Comprehension - STUDENT SURVEY

Please answer the following questions as indicated:

1. Which type of listening comprehension exercise did you do? Circle a. and/or b. below:
   a. Audio-only listening comprehension (you only listened to the recording)
   b. Audio-visual listening comprehension (you listened and watched the video)

2. Did you enjoy the listening comprehension exercise? Rate how much you enjoyed it with a
   number (0 = I did not enjoy it; 1 = It was just OK; 2 = I enjoyed it very much): __________

3. Why? Please give reasons for your response in 2 above:

4. What did you find difficult in this listening comprehension activity? Please, explain in the
   space below:

5. What did you find easy in this listening comprehension activity? Please, explain in the space
   below:

6. Did you take notes while you were listening? Circle one:  YES   NO

7. Did you begin doing the exercises during or after you heard the listening material? Circle
   one:  DURING   AFTER

8. How difficult did you find the comprehension questions? Rate how difficult you found the
   exercise with a number (0 = I did not find it difficult; 1 = It was just OK; 2 = It was very
   difficult): __________

9. How difficult did you find the fill-in-the-blanks exercise? Rate how difficult you found the
   exercise with a number (0 = I did not find it difficult; 1 = It was just OK; 2 = It was very
   difficult): __________
10. How do you think you did overall on the listening comprehension exercises? Rate your performance with a number (0 = I did not do well; 1 = I did OK; 2 = I did a very good job):
   Comprehension questions: ________
   Fill-in-the-blanks exercise: ________

11. What other comments do you have about this listening comprehension activity?

OPTIONAL EXPANSION:

12. Which type of listening comprehension exercise did you enjoy the most? Circle a. or b. below:
   a. Audio-only listening comprehension (you only listened to the recording)
   b. Audio-visual listening comprehension (you listened and watched the video)

13. Why? Please give reasons for your response in 12 above:
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