A Blended Learning Approach:
The New IE Active Listening Course

Joseph Dias and Gregory Strong

This paper examines the evolution, implementation, and evaluation of Active Listening, a new weekly 90-minute semester-length listening course which is part of the Integrated English Program (IEP) in the English Department at Aoyama Gakuin University. The IEP is a two-year compulsory academic English program for some 585 freshmen and sophomore English majors. Introduced in 1992, it has since undergone substantial revision. Freshmen entering the IEP are given a placement test to determine their entry point in the program. They are then placed at one of three levels. The program consists of two courses—each primarily focused on a particular skill—IE Writing and IE Listening (now revised as Active Listening, the subject of this paper); a combined skills course, IE Core; and two additional courses for sophomores, Academic Skills, a course concerned with comprehending lectures and effective note taking; and Academic Writing, meant to prepare students for the research papers they will need to produce later in their academic careers.

I. Background to the Change

Changes that brought about the new Active Listening course were implemented in 2009, resulting in a blended learning approach. In this approach, a curriculum is delivered both online and in the more

traditional face-to-face manner (Stevens, 2004). Rice (2007) and Stoller (1995 & 1997, in review) describe how changes in education are often motivated by the recognition of new teaching practices, materials, and curricular alternatives, as well as by exposure to language acquisition research—and more general pedagogical innovations— through attendance at conferences and by monitoring publications in a variety of related fields. Each of these factors played a part in the development of Active Listening.

To begin with, its precursor, IE Listening, was introduced as part of the IEP from its very beginning. Much like other listening comprehension courses found in language programs in Japan at the time, it was conducted in a listening laboratory with audio and video capabilities, but without computers. Teachers would play 20-minute video selections from documentaries, many of which were drawn from hour-long National Geographic programs that related to different themes in the IEP (see Fig. 1). Each theme had been developed into a curricular unit. After students were shown a scene or a short video sequence from one of the sections of a unit, they answered multiple choice questions presented in an in-house text. The teacher then went through the answers with the class, adding commentary about cultural or linguistic points.

In addition to the factors motivating curriculum change described earlier, student evaluations of the IE Listening course played a key role in the revision of the course and ultimately in the formation of Active Listening. Rice (2007) describes the way in which "students' needs and desires, expressed formally through mechanisms such as program evaluations and surveys or informally through vocal suggestions or complaints to teachers or coordinators can be a very important driver of change" (p.5). In student evaluations of the IE Listening courses at the end of the first few semesters, the materials were criticized for being uninteresting and students did not feel that

their listening had improved much.

Furthermore, in the first year of the course, IE Listening teachers graded their students on their listening performance in each class, making for a very stressful learning environment. This particular aspect of the course was changed the following year. Subsequently, students were evaluated through mid-term and final tests, as well as on their homework and class participation.

Gradually, other changes were undertaken. Higher interest listening materials were developed into units of study to be completed every two weeks. Each curricular unit was divided into phases: pre-listening (including vocabulary exercises), listening, and post-listening. Topic knowledge questions were part of the pre-listening phase so that students could learn how to access their background knowledge of the topic when listening. Chiang and Dunkel (1992) are among the numerous researchers who have found that prior knowledge increases students' scores on tests. In order to demonstrate the teaching of micro-skills—such as listening for key vocabulary, names, and numbers—to course instructors, teacher workshops were conducted. Figure 1 shows the three levels of IE Listening and the listening micro-skills to be taught in the course. The same skills were covered in various ways at each level of the program.

A formal course evaluation was initiated after discussions with teachers and course writers. Classroom observations identified additional weaknesses in the listening course. Strong (1999) reported on an external evaluation by Alister Cumming of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education who noted that the multiple choice format of most of the listening questions was more appropriate for testing than teaching. At best, these types of questions might be used as part of student self-access materials. The multiple choice questions did not seem to assist students in improving micro-skills such as identifying
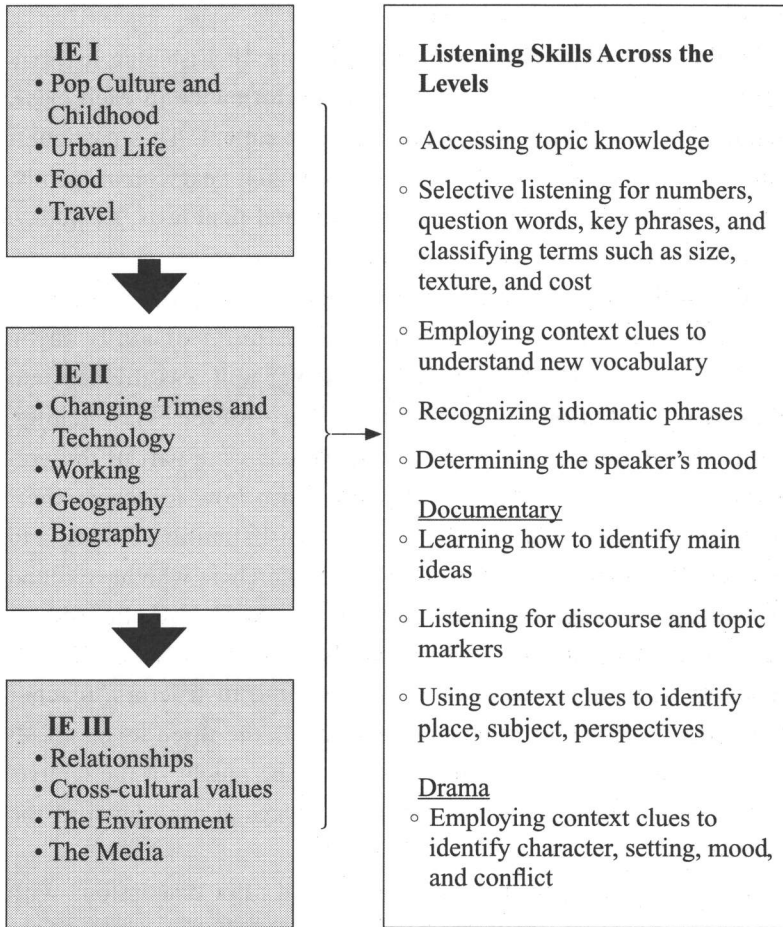
IE I • Pop Culture and Childhood • Urban Life • Food • Travel	**Listening Skills Across the Levels** ○ Accessing topic knowledge ○ Selective listening for numbers, question words, key phrases, and classifying terms such as size, texture, and cost ○ Employing context clues to understand new vocabulary ○ Recognizing idiomatic phrases ○ Determining the speaker's mood
IE II • Changing Times and Technology • Working • Geography • Biography	Documentary ○ Learning how to identify main ideas ○ Listening for discourse and topic markers ○ Using context clues to identify place, subject, perspectives
IE III • Relationships • Cross-cultural values • The Environment • The Media	Drama ○ Employing context clues to identify character, setting, mood, and conflict

Fig. 1: IEP Themes and Micro-skills in IE Listening

contractions and reductions in speech.

A needs analysis for IE Listening was undertaken in the year 2000. Needs analysis refers to "the activities involved in gathering information that will serve as the basis for developing a curriculum that will meet the learning needs of a particular group of students"

(Brown, 1995; p. 35). In such studies, researchers collect both qualitative and quantitative information through questionnaires, tests, interviews and observations. To determine the needs of the various stakeholders in the program, Kikuchi (2001) used three of the seven types of triangulation described by Brown (2001, p. 29). Interviews were used to develop a questionnaire that was administered to 585 students, and a slightly revised version of it was given to 9 teachers. Open response and closed-response items were presented to students and open-response questionnaires and interviews were conducted with teachers (methodological and data triangulation). In addition, the 2 program coordinators were brought into the study (investigator triangulation).

The questionnaire asked students about their goals in six areas: target tasks (or what the students hoped to use English for); problems that students experienced in class; student priorities in listening; suggestions for exercises in class to develop their abilities; student attitudes toward listening; and student solutions to current problems. The results of the questionnaire suggested six possible revisions to the course: (1) bringing in more practical English conversational skills, (b) using more varied videos from film and TV, (c) referring to video transcripts in class, (d) allowing students to have their own copies of the videotapes used in class, (e) introducing listening homework, (f) and—as most classes were taught by Japanese teachers—requesting that English be the medium for classroom instruction (p.45).

Gradually, over the next seven years, many of these revisions were introduced into the course. In the past, the activities in our listening units were largely confined to discreet-point exercises of true-false, multiple choice, and matching items. These exercises failed to impart the type of strategic listening skills described by Mendelsohn (1995), which include strategies to help determine mood, topic, and the main

idea of a passage. Consequently, we worked on listening activities that would provide strategy training while encouraging pair and small group work in class.

We expanded our bank of listening materials to include scenes from popular films, TV serials, TV news, and music videos as well as different types of listening tasks and question types, including matching and sequencing. More emphasis was placed on the use of idiomatic language and reductions. We also expanded such post-listening activities as writing-in-role, summarizing, and evaluating. For listening to news, we emphasized the identification of key words, finding the main idea, and answering the basic questions of who/what the listening passage was about, and where and when it referred to. All of the video material was transferred to DVD format, providing chapters for easier teacher access in class. The units on music videos included cloze dictations and cohesion activities in which students sequenced scrambled stanzas from songs. Students also identified aural devices such as rhyme and alliteration in songs, as well as the poetic devices allusion and metaphor. Finally, sessions on teaching listening and using the new materials were incorporated into the annual IEP teacher orientation.

One example of our new materials is a unit created for IE III Listening on the theme "media." Based on several scenes from the film *Broadcast News* (1987), the unit's learning objectives include introducing the work done at a TV station, learning key vocabulary used in the media and in foreign affairs broadcasts, and using visual, situational, and spoken context clues to guess the meaning of the dialogues. Students also were encouraged to guess the emotions of various characters and to listen for features of the spoken language that could give them clues about what was happening.

These changes in the IE Listening course meant that we had to assess our students' progress and achievement differently. As we tried

to implement a more active class through more diverse classroom activities and through pair and small group work, we asked IE Listening teachers to assess their students accordingly. Homework assignments became elements of student assessment, along with class participation, and the midterm and final tests.

But even with these changes, student evaluations of the program remained mixed. Dias and Kikuchi (in press) found that there had been very little change in student evaluations of the course between 2000 and 2005. Using four of the seven types of triangulation described by Brown (2001, p. 29), the 2005 needs analysis (Dias and Kikuchi, in press) involved 325 then-current students, 15 teachers, and 26 students who had already completed the program (data triangulation). The study employed open response and closed-response questionnaires with students, open-response questionnaires with teachers, interviews, and "focus group" sessions with former students (methodological triangulation). In addition, the program coordinators were brought into the study (investigator triangulation). The fact that there was a five-year interval between the two rounds of needs analysis studies meant that time triangulation was also employed.

Issues that arose in the focus groups reinforced what had been uncovered through the surveys and interviews. For example, some teachers focused on the "while listening" exercises—to the exclusion of pre- and post-listening—in a teacher-centered manner.

At the same time, the students' meta-cognitive awareness was seen in their realization that the program aimed to teach the four skills in an integrated way. They saw listening as a skill integrated with the other three skills, particularly speaking and reading. In the focus group dialogs they frequently brought up what they were doing in their Core classes and IE Seminars when speaking of listening. They did not see listening as a skill to be developed solely in IE Listening.

Students appeared to appreciate the connections among the skills and how they were addressed in the various courses.

Some negative aspects of the program intimated in the surveys were also underlined in the focus groups. For example, there was little that was memorable about the course materials. If the students remembered any aspect of the course, it tended to be material brought in by the more enterprising teachers, such as a task that involved students writing descriptions of characters in an American TV drama and then revising the descriptions and personality characteristics as the drama unfolded. This suggested that tasks which allowed the students to engage critically and creatively with the content would be more memorable, and perhaps of greater long-term, pedagogic worth.

Observations of listening classes showed that many teachers continued to show a video sequence to their classes, have them do multiple choice questions, and then confirm the correct answers orally by calling on individual students. The teachers seemed uncomfortable with small group work. Other activities that we had tried to introduce into the course were not used very often. There were physical constraints as well. For example, the CALL (Computer-Assisted Language Learning) rooms, where all the IE Listening classes were conducted, had fixed desks, and the majority of the listening classes were large, with 35-40 students. These aspects of the course made it difficult for teachers to put the students into pairs and small groups. All of these constraints would have to be addressed in a new listening course.

At the same time, because the midterm and final tests in the course comprised some 80% of each student's grade, there was an unfair advantage for students who entered the course with higher than average English abilities. These students, usually returnees who had spent several years living in English-speaking countries, might do very little work in the IE Listening course, and even miss many of

the classes, and still get a high final grade. Their course grade was a reflection of their pre-existing abilities, rather than the work or language learning that they did in the course. Many of these high-ability students found IE Listening far too easy.

The findings of the needs analysis can be further summarized as follows:

- Teachers and learners had similar perceptions of the students' difficulties in listening, with limited vocabulary, colloquial expressions, connected sounds unique to English, and the speed of naturally spoken English seen as the main obstacles to comprehension.

- In terms of content, students expressed interest in movies and music while teachers tended to overestimate the students' interest in news, current events, and documentaries, perhaps superimposing their own interests onto the students'.

- Both teachers and students saw the video material as being rather dated. The advent of new media, such as podcasting and video streaming (e.g., YouTube, 2009) has affected students' perspectives on the freshness of content and there is less tolerance of older video material.

- Learners were more oriented to such non-academic uses of English as being able to comprehend English-medium films, and teachers had the equally valid orientation to the career goals and the immediate academic needs of their students.

A rich mosaic of students' and teachers' needs and perceptions were depicted. Points of consensus between the preferences and

perceptions of teachers were given priority in informing program administrators of the direction of change, while the points of divergence were seen as possible constraints, challenges, or areas that required "consciousness raising."

The findings pointed to the need for…

- The use of shorter segments of listening material for meaningful interaction with classmates.

- More choice to be placed in students' hands when selecting listening materials.

- Opportunities for students to do repeated listening to graded texts, with special attention to vocabulary development, colloquial expressions, and connected sounds unique to English.

II.   A Blended Learning Approach to Listening Instruction

As a result of the ongoing student evaluations of the IE Listening course and the findings of two comprehensive needs analysis studies—made up of questionnaires, focus group and individual interviews, and classroom observations—the course developers decided to make a break with the past by abandoning the materials and classroom practices used until then. Starting with a new name "Active Listening," the reinvented course would allow students to take a much more active role in their language learning.

Evolving technologies and the widespread access to and interest in streaming video, suggested that we make use of the video sharing website YouTube, where the average length of videos is less than three minutes (mwesch, 2008), as well as other popular streaming

video sites. Also, after sifting through a large volume of free online ESL listening resources, we felt that, if students were given sufficient assistance in locating materials that offered transcripts and other learner supports, they themselves could make informed choices of listening materials which best suited them. Instead of designating an area of the university library, English Department office, or Foreign Language Library for self-access materials, they could be offered more efficiently, economically, and in greater abundance, online.

Instruction which combines the use of information technology and the Internet with some aspects of more conventional teaching in a mortar and brick setting is often referred to as "blended learning." In Active Listening, it would involve the use of listening sites (both free and commercial; made for ESL and general purpose) with in-class activities and tasks set up around them.

At its best, blended learning can draw upon the most attractive features of CALL— including individualized instruction, ease of access from the home or through mobile devices, along with a sea of choices—and the most desirable aspects of a traditional teaching setting—an enthusiastic and responsive instructor, good course materials in the form of books, and face-to-face contact with peers.

The principal means of providing students with a more active role in the new course is in teaching listening as an integrated task. Ellis (2005) describes this approach as one in which learners treat language as a tool for communication rather than an object of study. Fluency and communication become more highly valued than accuracy (p. 6). There is a marked difference between classrooms with these types of tasks and those dominated by a traditional pedagogy in which the teacher dominates all discussion, as there are far fewer opportunities for language learning in the latter.

In addition, there is considerable support for the approach. Long and Porter (1985) estimate that if even half of the time in class were

spent on group work, students might have five times as much time to speak. Small group tasks provide many such opportunities for students to initiate conversation and respond to it. Jacobs (1998) makes a similar argument for cooperative learning in the classroom instead of teacher-fronted classes in which the teacher speaks for much of the time. He maintains that not only can group work provide students with many more opportunities to speak, but it can also reduce learner anxiety. Brown (1994) enumerates four other advantages to group work with students: enhancing the quantity and quality of student linguistic output, encouraging reticent students to participate, promoting learner responsibility and autonomy, and as a step toward individualizing instruction for students if the teacher selects appropriate groups for individual students (pp.173-174).

In Active Listening, one means of getting students to take a more active role in listening and in learning English is through providing structured language learning tasks to be done in groups. In one such task (which we call an "interaction"), students present listening materials to their peers. A second type of group work in Active Listening is when a small group of students prepare to give a presentation to the class on collaboratively selected and "processed" listening content. Both of these tasks require preparation outside of class. In order to be properly prepared and avoid embarrassment in class, students need to listen to materials repeatedly until they fully comprehend them. It is mainly through these repetitions, followed by presentations of the material to other students in the class, that most of the students' learning takes place.

Other language learning tasks require individual students to select their own listening materials from a number of vetted sites. The students prepare written reports on this listening. Finally, some commercial online, self-access listening materials are made available for required outside-of-class use. Students access these to learn

	Pop Culture and Childhood	Food	Urban Life and Social Issues	Travel
(A) IN-CLASS **AV materials used in class by the teacher**	REAL TALK: Duffy, music SUMMIT TV 1-1#: On-the-Street: "How Would You Describe Yourself?" SUMMIT TV 2-1#: On-the-Street: "Dreams and Goals", SUMMIT TV 1-8#: Short Documentary: "Being a Better Parent (Discipline), (Setting Limits)"	REAL TALK: Robbins & Vegetarians	SUMMIT TV 1-5#: On-the-Street: "How Do You Feel About Living in the Suburbs?" SUMMIT TV 1-5#: On-the-Street: "How Do You Deal With Money?" SUMMIT TV 2-4#: Short Documentary: "Handling Anger"	SUMMIT TV 2-6#: Short Documentary: "Air Travel: Travelers Beware!"
B)INTERACTIONS **Students prepare these for class** 30% of final grade	INTERACTION: Introduce a favorite song from the Internet to some classmates	INTERACTION: Find the best or most unusual recipe from the Internet to some classmates	INTERACTION: Report on a news item or a social issue using Internet sources	INTERACTION: Choose a city and present a weekend itinerary from Internet sources
C) TEACHER-MONITORED SELF ACCESS 25% of final grade	Students complete 25 units of reallyenglish.com (and 3 interactions), or 30 units for large classes (and 2 interactions). This part of the course is to be done as homework. The teacher set deadlines for completing the units and monitors individual student progress.			
(D) SELF-DIRECTED LISTENING 25% of final grade	Students complete 3 reports and 1 movie listening log or 4 reports.			
(E) LISTENING TEST 20% of final grade	A performance-based test of each student's listening ability in the last class.			

Fig. 2: IE I Active Listening

micro-skills and listening strategies.

Figure 2 shows the four themes of level I in the IEP and the five components of Active Listening. Teachers are required to cover all

four themes in the course, but they can choose from among various tasks at each level.

In Figure 2, the first component listed is the "in-class" portion in which teachers instruct students in listening strategies while using TV documentary news content drawn from the *Summit DVD with Activity Worksheets* (2006a, 2006b). This a series of two commercially produced DVDs and teacher's booklets with teacher instructions, transcripts of the listening passages, as well as reproducible worksheets. A feature of the DVD is that it can provide optional closed captioning. Apart from its documentary content (episodes from the ABC news magazine "20/20"), the series offers authentic listening passages in the form of "on-the-street interviews" with native speakers questioned on such topics as the ones in the IE I "Pop Culture and Childhood" themed unit: "How would you describe your personality?" and "How would you describe your dreams and goals?" The language in the interviews is that of everyday use, so it is of practical value to students. The documentaries feature high interest stories, such as "Air Travel: Travelers Beware!" which is designated for the Travel-themed unit. It is about the various ways that air travelers are defrauded by thieves at airports.

Additional materials for the "in-class" component consist of videos recorded specifically for the Active Listening course and uploaded onto the university website or copied onto DVDs for teachers' use in the classroom. These video sequences, termed "Real Talk," have task sheets to be used with them. Active Listening II, for example, includes a recorded interview with musician Amy Christmas, who left her clerical job to pursue her musical avocation.

For the second course component, "interactions," worth 30% of the final grade, each student chooses a streamed video from a website, transcribes it, and prepares pre-listening, during-listening, and post-listening questions for three or four of their classmates.

Then, each student presenter plays a video sequence to a small group of classmates, asks them questions and leads a short discussion. Depending on the class size, the student presenter may repeat this task two or three times. Over the term, each student will create two or three interactions.

The content of each interaction is based on one of the four themes at that level of IE. For example, in Active Listening I, each student chooses a music video of a favorite song such as those uploaded to YouTube (2009) prepares pre-listening questions, a listening cloze of the song's lyrics, and post-listening comprehension questions. Figure 3 shows a music video available on YouTube (2009).
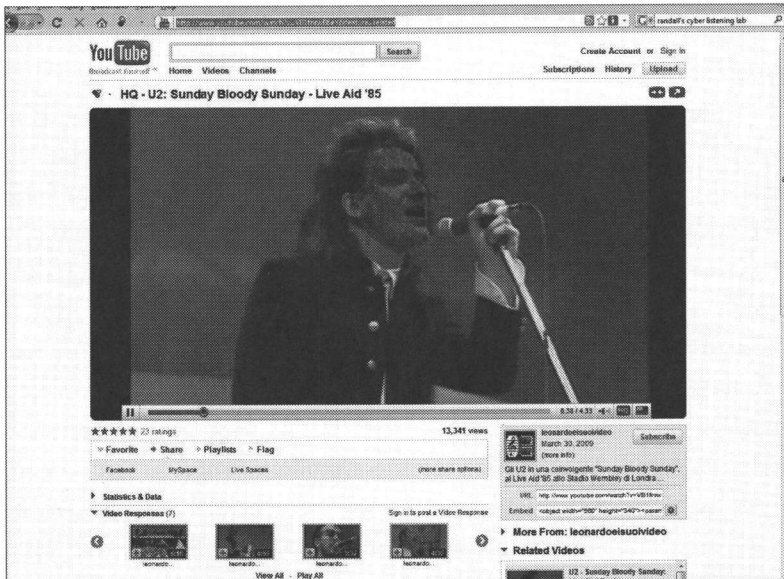
Fig. 3: YouTube Website Showing U-2 Music Video

Teachers evaluate each student presenter on five different measures: maintaining eye contact and gestures, speaking clearly and at a good pace, creating effective video listening activities, asking

questions of the group (including follow-up questions), and keeping the group focused on the task and interested in it.

There is a five-part evaluation of the student presenter's written work as well. The criteria include whether or not the student cited the source of the listening material used, listed 5 keywords or terms found, wrote a paragraph-length summary of the contents of the video, and prepared the report in a well-presented document.

In class, the student presenter plays the song to two or three different groups, repeating the same presentation. Tasks with repetition provide the student with an opportunity to gain greater confidence and fluency with the material as well as to increase the likelihood of language acquisition (Bygate, 2001). As the student presenter switches groups each time, the material is new to each group of student listeners.

In the third component of the course, "teacher-monitored self-access," worth 25% of each student's final grade, students do listening modules available on a commercial website, reallyenglish's "Practical English" course (Real English Broadband, 2009). Initially, they take a placement test and on the basis of their results are assigned a set of 10 modules that are matched to their level, from a bank of more than 300 lessons. Students proceed at their own pace. On the basis of the students' scores, they can move to more advanced materials at a quicker or slower pace. In this way, the instruction is individualized. The teacher monitors student progress online and, from the site itself, email messages can be generated which warn or encourage individual students or the entire class. Figure 4 shows a screenshot of two listening lessons from the Practical English course with two different exercise types.

For the fourth component of the course, worth 25% of the final grade, students listen to their choice of, at least, four different audio passages from a selection of freely available, vetted websites, such
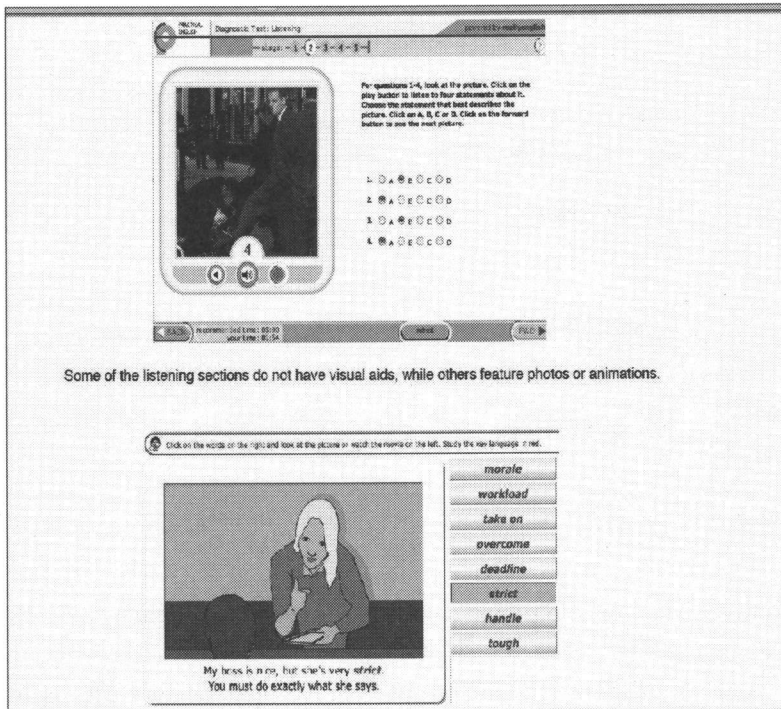
Fig. 4: Sample Screens from the Practical English course

as Randall's Cyber Listening Café (2009) or ESL-Bits (2009). They are required to write a report and summary of each of the materials. For example, one feature on ESL-Bits is entitled "How to Survive Life's Tests," a speech by a college English teacher, Kendra Jones, describing how her father inspired her to be tough and to challenge herself. Figure 5 shows the format for the written report.

The fifth component of the course is the listening test on the last day of class. This is a performance-based test of each student's listening ability and it is worth 20% of the final grade. The tests are the same as those that were used in IE Listening and their purpose in

Fig. 5: An Example of a Report for the Self-directed Listening Task

Active Listening is to provide an objective measure of each student's listening ability.

Since a diligent student might achieve near perfect scores in "interactions" or "teacher-monitored self access," it was felt that a test should constitute part of the final course grade. In that way, ability under time pressure and without recourse to innumerable repetitions (rather than purely diligent performance) might provide a more balanced and fair evaluation.

III. Implementing Change

Implementing a major curricular change such as this one calls for careful and thorough implementation. Curtis (1999), reviewing the published literature, suggests that successful curricular change is especially dependent on support from the teachers as agents of change. This support, based on the teachers' needs, will affect their

acceptance of the new course. At the same time, provision must be made to include their ideas so that they feel that they are contributing to the new course; that they have a personal stake in its success. This means involving them in each stage of the curriculum development process.

In the case of the Active Listening course, two years before the course was initiated, we began our preparations with a series of presentations to the teachers explaining the need for the change by reviewing past studies of the IE Listening course. One year in advance of the new course, teachers assisted in piloting language learning tasks, such as the one in Active Listening I in which each student presents their favourite song to a small group. This was a relatively simple task and it was a very popular one with the students. After many of the listening teachers had tried this task in their classes and met with some success, their comments helped us to make important changes in the nature of the task, and its evaluation. Hutchinson (1992) suggests that the important thing is not to get the ultimate product but to make the first concern that of making the process of change into a consultative one. It is better to have faculty members vocalize their concerns rather than to suppress them and undermine the changes through a lack of engagement. In our case, discussions with teachers proved invaluable in every aspect, even when they were negative ones, as this enabled us to see where we had to put more effort: into explaining the course, providing demonstration lessons, or offering other support to teachers.

One specific challenge was in familiarizing teachers with accessing the Internet for project work in class. Few teachers had any experience doing this even though their CALL classrooms were equipped with Internet connections. A number of orientations and model lessons over lunch periods and on Saturdays were used to demonstrate use of the internet in class.

During each semester prior to the introduction of the course, meetings were held to explain the changes, to garner feedback, and to revise the course. After the course started, teachers also contributed by collecting good examples of student reports for the self-directed learning task. These reports were circulated among the listening teachers, providing benchmarks for future class reports.

We are at an early point in the development of Active Listening. As mentioned earlier, many curricular innovations fail. Stoynoff (1991) describes five factors in a 1971 analysis by Rogers and Shoemaker of 1,500 studies of innovation that affect the successful implementation of a curricular innovation (p.11). These consist of the relative benefits of the new approach versus the old one, its compatibility with existing teacher practices, the complexity of the new approach, whether or not there is enough time to experiment with it ahead of time, and finally its observability in terms of seeing results from the innovation.

IV. Assessing the New Active Listening Course

Given the high rate of failure in curricular innovations and our experience with student and teacher criticism of the IE Listening course, we wanted to take an early assessment of the Active Listening course. We asked teachers and their students to participate in an extensive survey of their attitudes towards the new course.

Students in the classes of 16 teachers—6 foreign and 10 Japanese—were surveyed using customized surveys made available through a "professional" subscription to the online survey service SurveyMonkey (2009). One teacher had two sections, so there were 17 classes in total. Only one teacher in the program failed to have his students respond to the questions. Four of the teachers had never taught a listening course in the IEP previously, but 5 had taught IE

Listening for 10 years or more; and 6 for periods between 3 and 8 years. Three-quarters of the teachers had taught other courses in the IEP. As the survey was administered—for practical reasons—in the middle of the semester instead of at the end of the term, it is possible that some of the students may not have had the opportunity to carry out the more time-consuming tasks in the Active Listening course, such as presentations, or to access a significant amount of the self-access material for their listening logs.

As it was the first semester of the academic year, students were concentrated at the IE I (39%) and III (46%) levels because this program is for freshmen and sophomores, most of whom start at the IE I level and progress to the IE III level in the first semester of their second year. Meanwhile 4.5% of the students (n=19) were retaking their IE classes. We were particularly interested in the responses of the students who had previous experience with IE Listening, as they were in a position to compare the new IE Active Listening course with its forerunner.

Of those who had taken the listening course previously, 42.3% (n=85) felt that the changes to the course were "excellent" or "good," while only 13.9% (n=28) considered them to be "not so good" or "terrible" (see Fig. 2). Approximately half of those students were enrolled in one particular teacher's class. The 6 students who answered "terrible" were enrolled in 1 of 2 sections that were among the largest, with more than 30 students in each. So, the response may have had more to do with dissatisfaction with class size than with the teacher or the course itself.

When all of the students—not just the subgroup who had previously taken IE Listening—were asked, "In general, what do you think of the IE Active Listening course?" there was a considerably more favorable response (see Fig. 6), with 56.3% (N=239) of them considering the course to be "excellent" or "good," and only 11.1%

(n=47) considering the course "not so good" or "terrible" (see Fig. 6). Perhaps the initial chaos caused by problems in registering students for the self-access system and in teachers themselves trying to grasp the parameters of the new tasks, led students who had taken IE Listening previously to rate the more complicated, more demanding, and (initially, at least) more chaotic course less favorably.

We felt that it could not be assumed that all the teachers would
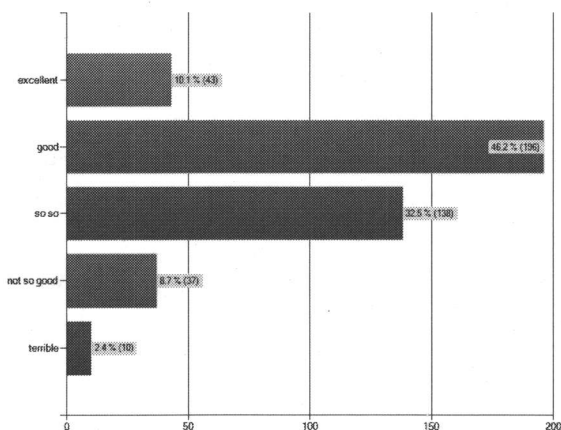
Fig. 6: Overall Student Evaluation of the Changes Made to the Course

introduce the new elements of the course, or that all the students would have carried them out. Therefore, students were asked if they had in fact experienced the innovations in question: "interactions," small-group interactive presentations based on intensive listening to content of their choice; "presentations," more formal reports given in front of the whole class, also based on freely chosen content; "listening logs" (another term for reports, see Fig. 5) or journals documenting outside-of-class listening to free online listening content vetted by the program coordinators and teachers;

"reallyenglish," the commercial web-based self-access system for monitored listening practice; and *Summit TV*, which features a DVD along with tasks and discussion questions. Subsequent survey items inquired about the degree of satisfaction felt by those who had done the newly introduced activities, allowing for open-ended comments so that we could get a richer assessment of why some of the activities worked better than others.

There was great variation in the uptake of the new activities and assignments. Table 1 shows the percentages of students who claimed not to have done, or were not sure about having done, each of the newly introduced features of the course.

Table 1: Overall Student Evaluation of the Changes Made to the Course

	Did do	**Didn't do**	**Not sure**
reallyenglish	90.5%	9.5%	0%
Summit TV	76.8%	7.3%	15.9%
Interactions	68.1%	11.5%	20.4%
Listening logs	48.8%	30.5%	20.7%
Presentations	30.6%	55.7%	13.7%

It was interesting that the two activities with the highest levels of uptake (reallyenglish self-access learning and *Summit TV*) were at opposite ends of the teacher-control continuum, with reallyenglish being completely student-led and *Summit TV* calling for a more traditional textbook-based, teacher-led approach. Listening logs had a far lower level of uptake, with fewer than half of the students reporting that they had done them. This might be due to the tendency of teachers to avoid assigning tasks that are time-consuming to read and mark in the larger classes. It was also curious that sizable numbers of students were not sure if they had done particular activities or not. Perhaps teachers used other ways of referring to the activities than the coordinators did in the course syllabus and survey.

After doing a follow-up questionnaire with teachers, we found that presentations were done by so few students simply because the "interactions," work with Summit TV, and administrative matters relating to reallyenglish took so much of the class time. This led us to revise Active Listening so that presentations would only be done at the IE III level.

On the whole, students gave much more positive than negative assessments of all of the newly introduced tasks and assignments (See Table 2). We felt that the relatively poor rating for the presentations may have been partially due to the fact that the lower level students were unequipped to cope with the demands of the task. The 56% of the students who answered "not so good" or "terrible" as their assessment of "reallyenglish" were distributed among the classes of just three teachers, which indicated that how teachers introduced the materials to students and monitored them might have had an impact on the students' evaluation. Clearly, the sizable portion of students in the "so so" category indicate that much can be done to make each of the course activities more appealing and their importance and relevance more salient.

Table 2: Student Evaluations of Course Activities and Assignments

	excellent or good	so so	not so good or terrible
reallyenglish	62.4%	26.8%	10.7%
Summit TV	61%	32.8%	6.1%
Interactions	60%	33.8%	5.4%
Listening logs	52.8%	37.4%	9.8%
Presentations	50%	39.6%	10.3%

When students were asked to choose their favorite and least favorite aspects of the course (they could only choose one of each), the self-access learning system "reallyenglish" was selected by the

majority as the favorite (33.7%), and as the least favorite (34.5%). This underlined the fact that one size does not fit all in a curriculum design and we were right in providing students with a wide range of tasks: some teacher-led, others student-initiated; some to be done in front of a computer; others to be carried out face to face. "Interactions" came in second as the favorite activity at 29.1% and "presentations" was second as the least favorite activity at 18%, largely supporting the findings of the items that asked students to rate the activities on a Likert scale.

Students were equally divided between those thinking that the amount of work required in the course was appropriate and those thinking that it was "a lot" (42.9% each). Only 11.8% of the students felt that it was too much and a tiny proportion (2.5%) felt that it was insufficient. Teachers showed close agreement with students in this regard, with most feeling that the course load was either "the right amount" or "a lot." Teachers in the larger classes, however, felt that they could not require that students do many listening log assignments without it being an excessive burden on the teachers to grade them. Fortunately, reallyenglish's self-access system provided convenient summaries of student work. It was up to teachers to monitor progress and send occasional messages of praise or warning to students (through a personal or bulk email sending feature). Although it took teachers some time to warm to this process, by the end of the semester at least half of them were using it on a regular basis.

Most of the 81 (out of 424) students who chose to write a comment along with their response to the question, "What do you think of the IE Active Listening course?", had positive sentiments to express. Some of them were remarks we had never before seen in the evaluations and previous needs analysis studies of the program. Here are some examples:

* "I like this class the best of all the classes I take."
* "We can practice not only listening to English, but also speaking it."
* "Our homework is excellent."
* "It's a lot of fun to do interactions."
* "I can be exposed to many kinds of information."
* "We can improve our listening skills every week. That is a wonderful thing."
* "The IE Active Listening course helps me improve my listening ability more than before."
* "This program is well organized. So, if we do it thoroughly, we probably can improve our skills."
* "I like IE class now. I think it is because members are active and eager to learn. And not afraid to show their opinions."

These comments were encouraging in that they led us to believe that the changes to the curriculum had increased student motivation, led them to approach the course more actively, and helped them see the relevance of what they were doing in class as well as the gradual improvement of their English listening skills. We also learned that most of the students did not see the introduction of discussions and presentations as taking away from time that could have been spent practicing listening, although a small minority of students and teachers did hold this view.

The bulk of the negative comments could be attributed to the initial difficulties in registering students to use the self-access learning system and in the teachers' difficulties in making the new tasks comprehensible to students, managing class time, and organizing complicated tasks efficiently, as the following comments attest:

* "Reallyenglish is a good tool for me to study, but it sometimes doesn't work."

* "It's good to have lessons made for listening, but because it's so new to the teachers too, it is a little confusing to get through it without mistaking." (sic)
* "I could not understand what I had to do. I wanted to know what I should do."

Students' comments allowed us to gain insights into how some of the activities that were less popular—such as presentations and the keeping of listening logs—were appreciated and approached constructively by some of the students. The comments will help us to frame the activities differently and better explain them to students in the future, hopefully insuring that the overall attitude toward them improves. Here is a selection of some of those remarks:

Concerning presentations…

* "It was really fun because the presenters try hard to make us understand what they wanted us to know."
* "We need more practice even in Japanese."
* "It's good for practicing speaking."
* "I think presentation skills will be necessary for all of the students in the future, especially for our job hunting."

Concerning listening logs…

"I found an interesting topic. I got excited by this!"
"We can choose any source to listen to and write a report, so I enjoyed it."
"I think my listening skills became better."
"I think it is good for us because I can get into the habit of listening to English more than before."

"The sites have various levels so I can choose the most suitable one."

One of the aspects of the new Active Listening course that we were especially keen to evaluate was the adoption of reallyenglish's "Practical English" online self-access system as it required considerable running costs and added—at least, initially—to the administrative work on the part of the university administrators, program coordinators, and teachers. We were heartened to find that, as of the middle of the first semester in which the system was introduced, more than 90% of the students were using it and, overall, student evaluations of it were favorable. Here are some representative comments:

* "Great resource to learn technical terms we do not usually hear about."
* "There are a lot of texts in reallyenglish, so I can enjoy many questions."
* "I think it is a good opportunity to listen to English in daily life."
* "I can learn many new vocabularies!!"
* "I could use this system easily and the content is interesting for me."
* "I think it's excellent because the grammar is explained in English."
* "It tells me how well I understand English and my skill right now, so I like it."
* "We can do it whenever we want to do it."
* "I like this system because I can practice both listening skills and vocabulary."

The constructive criticisms, as well as negative and ambivalent comments about the reallyenglish system gave us useful hints about how it could be used more effectively. Here are some of those comments:

"It is a good system but it is really hard to do each week constantly."

"This system is good, I think. However, it's a little burden on me because I have to do a lot of self-study and it takes me a long time."

"The computer is not capable of understanding our effort."

Such feedback helped us to adjust the number of lessons of reallyenglish that we assigned to students at each of the three levels of IE. We also learned what sort of guidance to give teachers on how they could encourage students and let them know that their efforts had not been in vain.

V.   Conclusions and Future Directions

On the whole, the teachers, the students, and the program coordinators were pleased with how the changes introduced in IE Active Listening resulted in 1) a boost to motivation as content became customized to students' needs and interests, 2) additional opportunities to listen to English, 3) more meaningful ways for students to communicate what they have understood, and 4) an increase in purposeful interactions among students focusing on a wide variety of listening texts.

It was interesting that some of the factors we felt might prove to be constraints (esp. the desks and chairs that were fixed to the floor of the CALL classrooms and therefore could not be moved for small group work) were not brought up as problems by either students or teachers responding to the Active Listening questionnaires. Nonetheless, the large size of some classes was mentioned as presenting challenges since it made it difficult to organize small groups for the interactions, not all students were able to finish their presentations, and the new tasks added to the marking burden of teachers, especially those with large classes.

Although we always encourage networking among teachers in the IEP, this is often difficult to achieve in practice as most part-

time teachers work at a number of different universities. However, a serendipitous outcome of the new curriculum was that teachers met together to discuss setting up the interactions task, to exchange possible solutions to registration problems in the self-access system, and to share information about YouTube videos and useful listening websites that offered streaming media. Therefore, some of the initial chaos and uncertainty had the positive effect of bringing teachers together to pool their resources.

It might be argued that the activities introduced in the new Active Listening class lack "authenticity" in that they—particularly the prepared discussions/ presentations about listening texts—do not correspond to real-world activities. It is true that the structure given to these activities locates them more in the realm of the classroom than on the streets, but "the kind of communicative behavior they elicit corresponds to the kind of communicative behavior that arises from performing real-world tasks" (Ellis, 2003, p. 6). For example, students who are talking about what has transpired in a video showing a couple's attitudes toward public displays of affection must reach a shared understanding, and it is necessary for them to clarify meanings. This is a kind of interactional authenticity that is highly desirable.

One additional way that we have tried to increase students' motivation and provide them an opportunity for "real-world" listening, is by inviting engaging speakers from many walks of life to speak to the IEP students in English at assemblies during class time. Speakers we have had in the past include the general directors of the NGOs "Doctors of the World" and "Doctors without Borders," the children's book author, Lynne Reid Banks, and the blues musician and raconteur, Steve Gardner. To prepare for the talks, teachers introduce related videos, such as the YouTube video on the history of MSF (MSF, 2008), recordings, exercises, and tasks that will

help students get the most from the lectures and ask intelligent questions during the subsequent Q & A. Since these talks cannot be scheduled at times when all the students can take advantage of them, we are creating videos featuring interesting people in the Tokyo Metropolitan area (vegetarian restaurant owners, singer/songwriters, etc.) and making them available for classroom use in the Active Listening program along with related real-world tasks. We also have reached agreement with Real English Broadband, the company that produces the online "Practical English" self-access system which we are using, to work toward making units customized with our own content, designed expressly for our students.

What we initially discovered through student evaluations and surveys of the IE Listening course led us to identify a particular set of needs, but they shed little light on how to meet them. The focus was, necessarily, on how things were and as they had been, not on how they could be. To connect the perceived needs with a set of solutions for meeting them, we had to have confidence that our teachers could cede control to students, and we needed to look at the ways students were using media, such as podcasts and YouTube (Dias, et al., 2008), for hints as to how these technologies could be harnessed for language learning purposes. For the latter, participating in numerous CALL conference presentations on blended learning, and reading studies of how the approach is being used in higher education (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008), helped to inform our adoption of it in the listening program.

This paper has shown that although the new Active Listening course made a break with the past by abandoning materials and procedures that were not effective in capturing the interest and motivation of many of the students, the changes were informed by what we had learned. Ongoing course evaluations, periodic observations by external evaluators, and the two major needs analysis

studies helped enormously in planning the changes.

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